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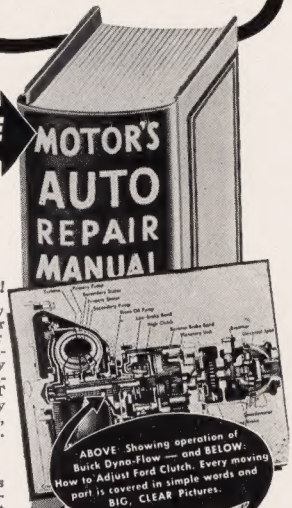

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Fire flashed from the opposite hilltop. The nasal whine of a slug split the brittle atmosphere. And down on the flat the calico reared, and a sagging body slipped into the snow.

THE WOLF-WOMAN OF CHANDINDU

By C. HALL THOMPSON

North of the Circle; out on the ice-choked Chandindu, Morna, dark-skinned, seductive daughter of a Pelly squaw and a red-headed Irishman, set her sights on a stolen pelt-treasure . . . then watched grimly while three wench-hungry brutes sought to lay the prize at her feet.

CAPTAIN MACKENZIE said, "It won't be easy."

Cody didn't answer. He stood by the window, his shoulders square and hard under the whipcord shirt. His lean, weather-burnt face didn't change expression, but, watching the sprawling main street of Fortymile, his eyes frowned. The brassy roll of a pianola in the Malemute Saloon sounded far away and sad. Somewhere, a team of huskies yipped and boots crunched in the snow. Yukon nightwind chewed at the cabin-chinking; outside the window, a frost-eaten sign creaked, peeling letters pale by starlight—ALASKA-AMERICAN FUR COMPANY.

Mackenzie's voice came again.

"No, gentlemen. The job won't be easy."

Cody turned slowly, eyeing the man behind the desk; Mackenzie had shoe-leather skin, a clipped gray mustache and a clipped ex-Army air. Cody let his lips smile.

"Captain, you got a talent for understatement."

The laugh came from a battered leather chair by the chimney. Cody's eyes flattened, swinging to the sound of it. Dix Brando didn't quit laughing. He leaned

back in the chair, square-jawed and blond, easy-moving and sure of himself, eight years younger than Cody's Alaska-hardened thirty-three. The kind women went for, Cody thought; the deviling grin, glib lies and hell-for-leather glance. Even a sweet kid like Beth had been fooled.

Brando's pale eyes were mocking. "The great Cody, A & A top troubleshooter—fretting about the routine of tracking down pelt-thieves?"

A muscle knotted in Cody's jaw. "Let's face facts. Netting Black Tucker won't be routine."

Brando lolled back insolently. He built a cigarette and lit it. The smoke curled through his grin. Captain Mackenzie cleared his throat; for a moment, on Brando, his watery gaze was indulgent. Then he straightened, formal again, Northwest Manager of Alaska-American.

"Cody may be right, my boy. Tucker's no fly-by-night fur pirate." Mackenzie frowned. "Used to be one of the best traders in the territory. Then we made him Chief Factor of the Chandindu Post. I don't know. Maybe too much power turned his head. Anyway rumors started. Nasty rumors."

Brando smoked, but behind the gray screen, pale eyes had narrowed. Cody was quiet, waiting.

"You heard about the Cree," Mackenzie said. "Crawled into town one night. Not pretty to look at; somebody'd used a blacksnake and hobnails on him. He talked before he died. A wild disconnected story about tortured Indians and Black Tucker; furs stolen from the Company and hid in a secret cache."

Cody nodded. "That's why the Chandindu turnover's been so light."

"For the last two years," Mackenzie said "Tucker told me the seasons were bad. I took his word for it—up to now." The deskchair scraped as the Captain rose. His face had a flushed, heavy look. "It's going to stop. I want friendly Crees, not slaves. I want those pirated skins. I want foolproof evidence against Tucker."

The office was quiet. Logs creaked under the tightening band of Northern winter. Down the street a whiskey-baritone chanted, several beats behind the rowdy brass of the pianola. Cody turned to Brando; one eyebrow lifted with the smile.

"Routine, chechako?"

Brandy wasn't laughing. Burnt birch sagged; a cloud of sparks beat up the chimney. Mackenzie cleared his throat.

"You have your orders, gentlemen. It's all yours."

Brando unfolded smoothly and stood up. He was tall and broad at the shoulders. He walked easily toward the door. Cody didn't move. His voice was dead level now.

"One more thing, Captain. I could work better alone."

Brando stopped short. Mackenzie looked up sharply; his bullneck got red. Brando said,

"Glory-hogging, Cody? Trying to make an impression on Beth."

The jaw-muscle twitched. Cody stood very still. "The job needs experience, Captain. Not smart, hothead tactics. We have to handle it cool, without force."

Brando curved thin lips. "No use, Glory-boy. Beth doesn't even know you're ali . . ."

Lean fingers clamped on the mackinaw; Brando's head jolted back.

Mackenzie snapped, "That's enough!"

Cody's grip relaxed slowly. A taut white line edged his mouth.

"Sorry, sir."

The Captain's gaze was cold. "This is no personal matter, gentlemen. You'll work together. Brando's had experience with other Companies. He's a man with a future in A & A."

And the son of your best friend, Cody thought. The son of a trapper that died and made you promise to look out for his boy. All Cody said was,

"Yes, sir."

Mackenzie nodded. "That's all, gentlemen. You leave at sun-up."

Cody turned and walked to the door. Brando opened it with a grinning mock-bow.

THE NIGHT air was sharp and clean. Cody took a deep breath. Forty-mile rocked with life. Miners jostled through the churned mud and snow of the street. The shrill laugh of a dance-dolly echoed from the Malemute. An old trail-chaser squatted on the Company porch, bottle propped on his belly, snoring it off. Brando flipped away his cigarette; it made a bright red arc against the night. Cody started for the Company barracks.

Brando said, "This is a big chance. The man that nails Tucker might even be the next Factor of Chandindu."

Cody said, "There's packing to do. You heard Mackenzie. Sun-up."

"Yeah. A real big chance." The sardonic grin widened. "Too bad you couldn't go it alone. It might make you a hero. Beth might . . ."

Quietly, Cody said, "We got a job, Brando. We'll follow orders. Together."

"Sure. Anyway, I don't figure you could buy Beth."

Cody's shoulders went rigid. He took a step toward Brando.

"Dix! I've been waiting for you."

The girl came up the steps, running a little, small and well made with dark hair blowing softly against her shoulders, a warm flush under clear skin. Her lips parted with the smile. Her hand was light on Brando's arm. Beth had lived too long in the frozen wastes of the Yukon, tending the old trader that was her father until his insides rotted with liquor and they buried him. She had been raised with the rude, hard-driving men of the territory and Dix Brando was something new to her. She had never known a man who could talk poetry and dress the gentleman and make her feel like a fine lady stepping out of Godey's magazine. She laughed now looking up at Brando. Cody had seen that trusting look more than once: in the eyes of a fawn just before the hunter fired. He started to turn away.

"Going so soon?" Brando grinned, looking at the girl. "Cody's kind of miffed. Thought he'd have the big deal all to himself. The Captain thought different."

Cody didn't speak.

"Come over to Beth's place," Brando said. "Drink a toast to our partnership."

Beth smiled. It was automatic. She wasn't really seeing Cody.

Her face turned to Brando. "A dangerous job?"

Brando's arm pressed her close. "Nice to have a woman worry about you, eh, Cody?" The laugh cut deep. "No call to fret, lady. The great Cody's going along. I'll be safe with the great . . ."

Cody said, "I'll be turning in now."

A hand reached out, brushing his sleeve. Her dark gaze was sincere.

"You will take care of Dix?"

Cody's chest felt tight. He didn't look at Brando. He didn't want to see that smile.

"He'll make out," Cody said gently. "Dix don't need anyone's help."

He walked away. His boots struck hollow sounds from the planks. Halfway down he crossed through slush to the barracks. Brando and the girl had not moved; they stood close in the porch shadows, her face turned up to his. Cody didn't look back again.

The barracks was dark and cold. He didn't set fire to the kerosene wick. He sat on the windowsill listening to the snow-muted rumpus of Fortymile. Some of the laughter belonged to Brando and Beth. He got out makings and rolled one; the planes of his face were hard in the match-flare. None of your business, Cody. A woman does her own choosing. Besides, she could be right. Sure, Brando could be solid under the cheap trimmings.

But when he bedded down sleep wouldn't come. He lay staring at the uneasy dark. Once, across the street, he noticed the yellow glare of Captain Mackenzie's window and Brando's tall shadow standing by the desk.

It didn't make him sleep better.

In the dark before sun-up, Fortymile was as close to bed as it ever got. The pianola still tinkled shrill polkas. A barfly wandered out of the Malemute, got as far as the hitching post and sat down. A tousled husky stretched and padded around the Company corral. There was a smell of snow in the air and Cody's dogteam snapped restlessly at harness. Cody worked silently on the leather sledstraps. He did not watch Beth.

She stood by the corral post, small in the circle of Dix Brando's arm. He kissed her. She didn't let go. He kissed her again and laughed.

Cody straightened, pulling up his parka hood.

"Whenever you're ready, Brando."

Brando grinned, Beth's hand in his. "Eager boy. Always in a hurry."

Cody ignored it. North, before the chafing team, the street lay white in the paling darkness. Beth said,

"I don't like it, Dix. This Tucker is in too deep. That kind kills when he's cornered."

Easy humor went out of Brando's face; it got thoughtful, set with a brittle hardness, as if he were enjoying the thoughts.

"Unless you kill first," he said.

Cody frowned. For a second Beth drew away. Then the mood passed. Brando's arm tightened on her waist.

"I told you, lady. Quit fretting. After all, with the great . . ."

Cody looked at him levelly.

Beth said, "You won't forget, Cody."

"Forget!" Brando laughed. "He loves me! Didn't you know? He loves us both."

BETH flushed. Cody turned back to the sled. His eyes were flat on the bleak reach of windswept tundras beyond the town. He hove against the gee-pole. The runners rocked free.

"Pretty near sun-up," he said, and threw a sharp, "Haw!" at the team. Brando fell into stride by the lead-dog as the lines hauled taut. The sled lurched forward, cut down the long empty street. The pianola had gone dead. There was no sound but the bright yelp of huskies and Brando's shouted, "Aiee! Mush!" Cody could see the girl, small and alone in the growing light. She was still waving. But not to him.

They struck North, a short leg along the Yukon, through silvered spruce groves and the cold shadows of sheer ice-hills. Brando moved steadily, cursing the dogs. His face wasn't easy and laughing anymore. His eyes were harsh, narrowed. Daylight went too quickly. Handling the pole, Cody didn't talk. He kept thinking of Brando's eyes; hearing words in the biting rush of wind: Unless you kill first, unless you kill . . .

He told himself he was crazy. Letting his feelings for Beth overrun common sense. Mackenzie was nobody's fool. Come time, Brando would handle Tucker and the Indians in the right way. He'd keep his fist away from the Colt thonged to his thigh. Cody tried to believe it. The accident didn't help.

The sun was going. A wolf loped to the crest of a distant tundra and squatted, panting, watching them. The birch sled swung right at the crotch in the Yukon and pitched Northeast on the treacherous rimrock of Chandindu River. Rounding a sharp bend, the sled-dog lost footing and slithered over the edge. The runners listed crazily and Cody lunged back against the geepole for counterbalance. The sled teetered, settled upright.

Brando's mukluks made a driving angry grind in the snow. The muscles of his jaw had that set, white look and he had freed the rawhide whip from his belt. Cody said, "Listen . . ." The wet tongue lashed out, slicing across the sled-dog's muzzle; the husky yelped and bristled. Brando's lips pulled back from clenched teeth. The thong swung wide for another blow. Cody caught the wrist.

"Easy, mister."

"We got time to make. No dumb bitch is going to bog us."

Cody's grip tightened. The whiphand lost color.

In a toneless voice, Cody said, "That's not Tucker you're beating."

Wind brushed south over the ice-choked Chandindu. Brando stood very still. Then his eyes veiled; he had control of himself. Without a word he twisted away. Cody took the lead after that. Brando didn't argue. They had no more trouble on the rimrock. But in gathering twilight Cody felt the pale eyes on him, watching, thinking.

They pitched camp at the foot of a steep hill dotted with a stand of aspens. It was too quiet. Somewhere on the tundras, a wolf worried the moon. The fire was feeble and sank low in melted ice. Cody dished up the grub. The bean-mash had no taste and the tea was bitter. Brando didn't eat. He sat silent now, smoking, easy and sure again, the boy with the clever smile. Finally Cody set down his tin plate.

"All right," he said. "Let's settle it."

Brando let out a smoke-cloud. Damp kindling sputtered in the fire. Cody said, "That talk about killing Tucker. Forget it."

"So you give the orders now?"

"We'll skip the humor, Brando. We'll forget Beth. That's our score. But this job is Company business. We take it slow and easy. We get evidence. We find out where Tucker cached the contraband, and how he figures to get it out of the territory. Then the law gets him."

"All nice and neat," Brando said. "Only maybe I got other ways of settling Tucker. For good." He rose slowly, facing Cody.

"Of course, my way takes guts."

Cody went ramrod stiff. One hand caught Brando's shirtfront. Brando threw the right low, under the belt. Cody doubled and a driving knee met his jaw halfway. He wheeled back, jarring against the sled. The dogs roused, snapping. Cody shook his head to clear it; his eyes were cold, expressionless. Brando closed in. Cody's mukluks dug deep, bracing for the charge. It didn't come.

Halfway between them, a sudden geyser of snow spouted up. A split-second later, the hammer and whine of a .30-.30 echoed high in the aspen grove. Cody went belly-flat in the sled shadows. For a moment Brando stood numb, outlined against the fire. "Down!" Cody snapped. And in the trees an orange flame-needle darted. Ice splintered near Brando's foot. He swore, sprawling in the snow not far from Cody. He was breathing hard. His lips looked bloodless. Cody smiled thinly.

"You wanted it the hard way, Baby. Here it is."

"Bright boy," Brando growled.

A minute passed. The gun in the hills waited. The wind soughed. Still lying flat, Cody slid the Winchester from its sled-strapped boot. His eyes swung past a rolling snow-hummock to a nest of jagged boulders ten yards beyond the firelit camp circle.

"I'm going over there," he said. "The rise'll cover me. Keep him busy with your Colt. When I get there, quit firing."

"But . . ."

"Quit firing," Cody said. "Whoever's up there, he'll get curious and head down. He knows something. We want him alive."

Brando frowned, drawing the Colt.

"Get that," Cody told him. "Alive."

Brando nodded.

THE GOING was slow. The hummock was shallow, poor protection, but beyond the fire, darkness helped. Cody crawled flat against the ice, holding the Winchester clear. Brando opened fire. The Colt slugs fluttered and ricocheted and in the aspen stand a heavy roar answered. Cody's hand was numb on the rifle; an iceridge dug at his face. He kept going. He made it. The Colt let go a final shot; the .30-.30 flashed and echoes died slowly. Then there was no sound at all.

Cody hunched in the lee of a tall boulder. His gaze flicked to Brando. If that gun-happy chechako moved too soon. But nothing stirred by the sled. The hillgrove was different. A small slide of shale and muddy ice trickled downgrade. Cody's fist hugged the rifle; the trigger was cold under his finger. The footsteps came down slowly, wary, the quick light tread of moccasins. The man was wearing a parka; the .30-.30 was ready in the crotch of his arm. Firelight picked out the flat, blank planes of an Indian face; hard black eyes probed the clearing. The Indian took a stride toward the sled. Cody stood up and levelled the Winchester.

"Don't turn around."

The Indian didn't. Only his arms moved. slowly swinging out and up. Cody moved in; the chatter of his mukluks sounded loud. He stopped with the rifle muzzle nudging the man's spine. The Indian let go of the .30-.30.

Cody said, "All right, Brando."

The figure by the sled stirred. Brando's lips were drawn back; as he bent for the rifle, his eyes glittered. He clubbed the .30-.30 and wheeled for the Indian.

"Easy!" Cody snapped.

Brando stopped the blow midway but his mouth stayed crooked.

Facing him now Cody reached out and slid the skinning-knife from the Indian's belt. The Indian stood quite still, nothing at all in his level stare. But when he breathed, a strong smell carried on the night air—the stink of white-man's rotgut.

In English Cody said, "You're a Cree from Chandindu Post."

The black eyes slitted. "No savvy."

"You're a Cree. Tucker sent you."

The brave took a step back. Automatically his hand went to the empty knife-sheath. All he said was, "No savvy."

"Lying sonofa . . ." The lunge was animal-quick, like the flare of Brando's eyes. The Colt-barrel raked down in a vicious arc. The Indian staggered to one side. Cody stepped between them. His voice was flat, final.

"The Crees are friendly. They can help us."

"Friendly!" Brando grated. "Yellow rats that snipe at you from ambush!" But he didn't go near the Indian again.

Cody turned. The Cree was on his feet;

a long rib of broken flesh oozed slow drops of blood that drained down the set mahogany jaw. There was something lost and beaten in the blank gaze.

Gently, Cody said, "You can talk to us."

The Indian stared. Cody switched to Cree dialect.

"It would be better for your people if there were no Tucker. Many sleeps ago a man came to your outpost and goodness went out of your lives because he brought hate and fear. He fed your braves whiskey to rot their minds and used a bullwhip on your squaws. He worked you until you dropped and stole most of the fruit of your traps for his own gain."

For a moment the Cree's face was not so empty. Cody said, "We can rid you of Tucker. Your children can laugh and be strong again. If you will swear that this man cheats you. If you will say how he hides and sells the peltries that belong to you and the Company . . ."

The Indian's mouth worked; then, hope shadowed away. The Cree shrugged.

"It is not easy to forget fear. It is not easy to risk a squaw and two sons when you have seen a woman cut to ribbons because she did not obey. You remember. You obey."

"Talk!" Brando rasped. "Let me handle this yellow . . ."

Cody's glance shut him up.

"There would be a new Factor at your Post," Cody told the Indian. "You would have to fear no man."

Maybe the black gaze twitched toward the tall dark reaches of the aspen stand. The Cree's tongue was thick.

"It is not only a man we have to fear..."

The words splintered on a sharp cry. The Cree's eyes went wide and he stumbled as the whine of a rifle whipped down from the grove. He swayed; his legs bellied and blood came from his mouth and nose. He crumpled.

Swearing hoarsely, Cody spun, levering the Winchester, firing blind into high blackness. Echoes rebounded. The other gun didn't bite back. Through his teeth, Cody said, "Take care of the Indian," and started up the steep grade. He ran in a low crouch. Drifts dragged at his mukluks. He waited for a yellow spurt of fire from the ambush. It didn't come. The climb was rugged. Rocks scraped at his clawing hands. Branches reached down and slapped across his face. He found the spot.

Moonlight etched the long print of a body where the Cree had sprawled and drawn bead. The chopping hoofmarks of two ponies beat off down the North side of the hill, jumbled here with the deep wide scars of the Indian's tread. Then Cody whistled softly and went to one knee. Another set of prints fanned out near brush where the horses had been tethered—the prints of small feet in dainty moccasins. Cody stood erect, frowning. Half aloud, he said "Not only a man . . ."

Abruptly he headed downhill. The Indian had talked. But not enough. The talk had shied clear of something; some special detail tied in with Tucker and a king's ransom in pirated pelts. Half running, he reached the campsite. And stopped.

Brando stood by the fire building a cigarette. Slowly he lit it with a burning twig. The smoke looked white in moonlight. Cody did not notice. He watched the Cree, the ragdoll figure lying face-up now, its eyes open and glazed, the blood making dark frozen stains in the jaw-stubble. A small wind brushed snow from the tundras; flakes settled on the Indian's eyes. They did not blink. Brando smoked.

Cody said, "He didn't say anymore?"

"He was dead when he hit ground." The pale angry gaze switched to the aspens. "Nothing up there?"

Cody stared at the Indian's frozen secret face. "Pony tracks heading North."

Brando stiffened. "Maybe if we trailed them . . ."

"At night? With a team of beat-out malemutes?"

They wouldn't have a chance. They both knew it.

Cody sounded tired, bitter. "We better dig a grave."

Brando stood there. Gradually the old mocking grin returned. "Don't beat the poor Indian, Dix. Use kid gloves on him. Let him stall. Wait till he's dead—then ask questions."

"Shut up," Cody said.

The smile warped. "Maybe you'll let me handle things next time."

Cody went to the sled. He shouldered the pick and dug the spade into snow near

Brando's feet.

"We better dig a grave."

They burnt a pit through the crusted snow and broke the rockhard earth beneath. It took time. Neither of them talked. A pack of gray wolves came down to the edge of the hillgrove and sat panting, yellow eyes shining, noses twitching to the smell of death. Brando swore and took a shot at them. They scattered. Minutes later they were back, waiting.

The two men bedded down. Cody slept badly. There was a dead Indian face in his sleep, a dead mouth that whispered, Moccasins. Not only a man, more than a man to fear, dainty moccasins. Cody started awake. There was cold sweat on the fist that reached out for the Winchester. The camp was empty, still. Maybe he had dreamed the soft grind of footsteps in the snow. But he couldn't get shut of the notion that they were watched by more than wolves. He did not sleep again. He lay there wondering.

THE CHANDINDU layout was a poor excuse for an outpost. The skinlodges were mangy and neglected; the untended fires were scanty. Squaws and children with the swollen bellies of hunger stood silent under the tent flies, their faces flat and beyond feeling. Only the black eyes narrowed, following Cody and Brando as they tooled the sled into the compound. Cree braves came slowly from the lodges, rifles and skinning-knives close to hand. Their faces were feverish with whiskey and blank surprise as if they watched dead men walking by. Brando flicked Cody an uneasy glance.

"I don't like it."

"Easy does it." Cody kept walking. Sled runners creaked loudly in the late afternoon quiet. The outfit headed past ragged tents toward the long low square of the Headquarters cabin. They didn't get far.

A tall, bony-ribbed Cree with the gold-ore amulet of a Chief hanging from one earlobe, made a swift sign. Nooselike, the Indians closed in on the sled. The lead dog reared back, white fangs bared, hackles bristling. Cody gentled it. The Cree Chief was close now, breathing whiskey, his hand tight on the knifehilt; sun winked on the razoredged blade. Brando squared off and his right swung low to the Colt. Quietly, Cody said, "No guns." Brando waited. The Indians halted. Cody looked at the Chief.

"We come to see Tucker."

A rough mutter ran through the crowd; it bellied back at the name. But the Chief came on, slow, deliberate, the knifehand lifting.

"Enough, Tantlak!"

The Cree froze, moccasined feet set for the spring. Something like panic stirred behind the dark, rum-fuzzed eyes. The wasted face went shapeless; he stepped back from Cody and turned. The bucks made a low, trapped sound. An aisle opened in the noose. Cody and Brando watched the white man advance.

Black Tucker wasn't tall but built across, with more than two hundred pounds of sinewed meat sheathing hard, heavy bonework. Thick arms and shoulders strained against the plaid mackinaw. His face was wide with eyes like frosted steel and seams of jowlfat hidden by a clipped blond beard. Teeth showed very white in a broad smile. Hobnail boots made a strong grating in the packed snow.

He looked at Cody and Brando. Weighty, wheezing faintly with movement, he turned to the Chief. The pleasant smile stayed put. Tantlak took another backward step. An old squaw stifled a scream as Tucker's haunch-like fist flung out. Cody caught the glint of brass knuckles. The Chief lurched and sprawled crazily. Casual, deliberate, Tucker drew back the left boot; the hobnails got Tantlak just over the temple. He flattened without a groan.

Tucker smiled, eyeing Brando's fist, white-knuckled on the gunbutt.

"I reckon you won't need that, Mr. . . .?"

Brando relaxed slowly; finally, his lips bent. "Brando," he said.

The broad face nodded genially, swinging to Cody. "Mr. Brando and . . .?"

Cody told him. Tucker nodded again.

"Just so. I've been looking forward to your visit."

The big hand reached out. Cody ignored it. The watching Cree's murmured uneasily. Tucker's smile got strained. He swung to the Indians, jabbed a finger at Tantlak. "Get him out of here."

The bucks did not move. The deep voice

went harsh.

"I said take him away."

Reluctantly two braves obeyed. Supporting Tantlak by the armpits, they dragged him off to a distant lodge. Cody watched, his mouth set and thin. Tucker had the grin back in place.

"You'll overlook the little rukus, friends. You can't trust these heathen devils for a minute."

"Did you ever try?" Cody said.

Tucker laughed as if it were a fine joke but his eyes didn't laugh with the rest of him.

"You've had a hard trek, friends. You'll want a drink. There's a good fire in the office."

He led the way. The sun lay very bright across the compound but there was no warmth in it. The Crees stood quite still, watching as Cody and Brando followed. There was blood on the snow where their Chief had fallen.

The Company Office was dim and hot with a smell of stale food and tanned hides. A hangdown kerosene lamp swayed idly above the rough-hewn table. The moth of flame danced high and dwindled with the closing of the door, casting dwarf-shadows on the mudchinked walls. The floorplanks groaned under Tucker's rolling stride. He brought a jug and tin cups to the table, wheezing, smiling.

"Grade A rum straight from Dawson. Nothing like a cup of cheer among friends."

He stopped. His eyes showed a flicker of annoyance. Cody saw why.

Brando had already spotted the girl. She stood on the right, in a bead-curtained doorway that led through a hall to another cabin. By lamplight her skin had a deep copper glow that blended with the mahogany red of thick soft hair. A full body pressed against the cotton blouse and fringed buckskin skirt and there was a taunting promise in dark eyes and red, parted lips. She walked with the native grace of a deer; her dainty, quilled moccasins made little sound. Those eyes smiled at Brando.

"It is not often we have distinguished guests."

Her voice was warm, like the searching touch of a hand. Cody glanced at Brando. Smiling, Brando eyed the girl, easy and speculating. He wasn't thinking of Beth.

"It's not often you find a beautiful woman north of the Circle."

Tucker scowled, then covered with a gravelly laugh. His tone had a sarcastic edge. "Gentlemen, my faithful wife. Morna, my little halfbreed minx."

The girl finished pouring the drinks and offered a cup to Brando. Their fingers brushed. Cody took his cup. He didn't drink.

Brando said, "To the minx."

Morna laughed. Black Tucker didn't; he downed the whiskey neat. His fat arm circled Morna; blunt fingers dug into the flesh of her shoulder. She let him kiss her. Cody saw Brando's lips tighten.

"A rare flower, gentlemen." Tucker grunted into the rustic chair by the table. "Her father was one of the first trappers to push into the Barrens. Big red-headed Irishman that took a Pelly squaw to his bed and board. The mother died in the Plague; the Irishman went chasing a rainbow gold pot. Never came back. And poor little Morna was all alone." The wheeze was meant for laughter; it wasn't pleasant. "But even before we married she could hold her own. Oh, yes. Little Morna will always hold her own."

THE LAMP idled gently. Outside, wind brushed against the walls. The silence got awkward. Morna tasted her drink, watching Brando over the cuprim. She went and sat on the quilt-covered sofa by the fire, stretching like a contented animal, her legs round and firm under the buckskin skirt.

Tucker refilled his cup. Getting back to business was an effort. He frowned. The worry looked real.

"I warned the Home Office, Mr. Cody. Heard they were sending you up and figured on trouble. These Crees hate the white man's guts. No telling what they might try on strange chechakos. Took me over a year to get them to heel."

"With hobnails and rotgut," Cody said tonelessly.

Tucker did not blink. The girl stopped sipping whiskey. The lamp swayed. Then that imitation wheeze-laugh shook the massive chest.

"Indians! All they understand is the whip and the boot." The grin jelled. "I been here a long spell, Mr. Cody. I run

my Post the way I see fit."

Cody said, "The Company wants friendly Crees. Not brow-beaten enemies!"

Thick jowls reddened; blunt fingers closed hard; the cup nearly bent under the pressure. "If I hadn't beat Tantlak, you'd have a slit belly."

Cody ignored the quick glance between Brando and the girl.

"You're discouraging," he said. "So was the ambush."

Anger had drained out of Tucker's face. His mouth hung open, wet and surprised. Give him one thing, Cody thought: he knows his act. Carefully, Morna set down the tin cup. Her eyes were on Cody now, no longer smiling or coquettish.

"They tried to bushwhack you," Tucker said. "Started already! These sneaking Crees." The chair rasped as he rose. "I'll get to the bottom of this. I'll whip the hide off the one that . . ."

"No use whipping a dead man," Cody said.

Tucker halted halfway to the door. Steel-gray eyes flicked to the girl. She turned away. Some of the warm color had left her lips.

"Dead?" Tucker asked.

Cody nodded. "We caught him. We started to ask questions. Somebody shut him up. For good."

Slowly, shaking his head, Tucker moved to the table. He poured a stiff one and swallowed it. "Another Cree. They had to keep it quiet."

Cody's eyes were steady. "We don't figure it that way."

Tucker looked up sharply. Morna had come nearer the table; she stood very close to Brando, her eyes bright and hard.

"Talk straight," Tucker said.

Cody was silent for a time. He looked at the girl, the brazen painted quillwork of moccasins. More than a man, his mind said: More than a man to fear. He swung back to Tucker.

"Where were you last night?"

An icy draft moaned in the chimney; a small powdering of snow fell and hissed in the fire. Flames leaped higher. There was sweat in the seams of Tucker's face; a single drop ran down into his beard.

"I don't think I like this, gentlemen. You come here on a routine Company check-up. You've got no right to make insinuations."

Brando stared at the girl. "Not exactly routine, Tucker." The girl did not look away. Tucker sat down. His hands were out of sight under the table. Cody remembered the heavy Colt thrust into the wide John Brown belt.

"I told you once, Mr. Cody. Talk straight."

Cody nodded. "Straight," he said. "Mackenzie wants to know why the Chandinku fur-take has dropped by two thirds."

Tucker let out a short laugh. The flat of one big hand slammed the table. He swung to Morna.

"A fine thing, eh, my sweet? A lot of gratitude I get! I slave to keep this post out of the red. The winters are lousy, the tramplines all but empty—and the Company accuses me of cheating!"

"Pirating's the word," Cody told him. "Selling contraband to a higher bidder."

Tucker got up and put his arm around the girl. He didn't quit smiling.

"I've had a hard day, mister. I like music but whistling in the dark bores me. My wife and I did not leave the Post last night. You've made Indian enemies; that's your lookout. The Post is open to inspection Ask your questions. Ask the Crees if I'm stealing their furs. Tell me how I get the goods out of Alaska. Then prove it."

The grin spilled over into that short belly-laugh.

"Stay as long as you like, gentlemen. Investigate. We'll make you comfortable. We'll help." The genial mask turned to Morna. "The old north cabin should do, my dear. You'll show them the way."

Brando frowned, the lines about his mouth rigid with anger. He started to speak. Cody shook his head. Maybe that didn't stop Brando. The quick look from Morna did.

Cody said, "Thanks for the invite."

The hearty laugh came again. The girl slipped into a parka and lit the wick of another lamp. They followed her to the door. A cold blast of night wind brushed into the cabin.

Tucker said, "One thing more. I can't promise to control the Crees forever."

Cody just looked at him. "We'll take our chances—with the Crees."

He closed the door. Even through the

heavy planks he could hear the jibing roll of Tucker's answering laughter.

They crossed the compound through pallid starlight; the bobbing lamp made a brighter lake around them. Morna's skin was flushed with the cold; her dark eyes moved to Brando at her elbow, then lowered. Nice touch, Cody thought; modesty and invitation in one neat package. Brando was smiling to himself. Cody didn't like it.

He didn't like the stillness, either; the silent statues of Indians by dwindling lodge fires. A screech-owl hooted in the spruce stand beyond the tents; ice muttered, contracting over the River. Getting the pack from their sled, they passed the Chief's lodge. Tantlak's heavy-lidded gaze trailed them; the blackened welts of hobnails stood out above his temple. Morna shivered, walking closer to Brando. Cody frowned.

The north cabin was one room with gray, dusty bunks and a draft through the crumbled logchinking. The butterfly lamp flame hovered, playing on the warm hollow of Morna's throat. She paused at the door, her eyes still holding Brando.

She said, "My cabin is next to the office. If you want anything . . ."

The words were for both of them; the tone was for Brando.

Cody looked at her. "We'll make out."

Brando worked that easy, boyish smile. "Too long in the Barrens, ma'am. Lost his eye for beauty."

She colored nicely. Then, quickly, with a shade of fear, "I hope you will stay."

"We'll stay." Brando nodded. "A long while."

Morna went out.

III

THE LAMP flickered. The fresh pine and violet scent of her skin was still in the cabin. Neither man spoke. There was kindling in a bin by the bunkwall. Cody started a fire in the squat, potbellied stove. Brando leaned by the window, staring across the compound. Finally he said, "Now what?"

Cody rolled a cigarette. "Now nothing."

The pale eyes narrowed. "I'm not so sure."

Cody lit up, tossed a splinter of tinder into the stove. "Tucker's got it tied up. These Crees aren't going to talk. Whiskey and terror; it's a sweet technique."

Brando turned. His mouth smiled, but his eyes glittered with that undertow of violence. "The Indians won't talk. But somebody might."

Twin ribbons of smoke drifted from Cody's nostrils. "She's his wife."

"That's why she'd know the facts."

"And hide them."

The smile went tight. "She could be innocent, Cody. She could be under his thumb and crying to get free."

"And I could be President Cleveland."

"Maybe you ought to shut up."

Cody just looked at him. Brando turned and walked to the window.

"She'll talk," he said. "All she needs is a sympathetic listener."

Cody killed his cigarette against the bunkpost. "That's out."

Brando wasn't hearing. "Cabin next to the office," he said. "If you want anything . . ." He straightened. The smile was handsome, sure again.

Cody's voice was even. "I said that's out."

"Remember the dead Cree, Glory-boy? This could be your second mistake." Brando started for the door.

"What about Beth?" Cody said.

It was more than a name; it was dark, clean-smelling hair and the soft lips of a girl laughing as she danced at the Forty-mile shindig to the lilting squall of a fiddle. Beth wasn't far away anymore; she was here, in the cabin, between them. Brando wheeled slowly. The grin looked painted-on.

"What about her? This is strictly business."

They stood face to face. Quietly, Cody said, "Don't get twisted, Dix. Don't head out on the wrong trail."

Brando let go a vicious sidehand. Cody's head slammed back against the bunkpost. His mouth had a wet salt taste. One fist knotted. Control wasn't easy. He managed.

"Yeah," he said. "Strictly business."

Brando's neck reddened. Abruptly he turned and went out.

Cody could still taste blood. He got a canteen from the sled-pack. The whiskey burned. He washed it through his teeth

and spat. He stood quite still, staring at space. You deserved it, his mind said: You asked for it. Brando's right. You think of Beth and everything else goes haywire. Forget Beth. Remember the job. The job. Quillwork moccasins. Small prints in a moonlit hillgrove. The minx knows something and Brando's the boy to find out. Sure. The job.

He built up the fire. The stove hissed and blushed orange at the seams. The room was still cold. He brewed scalding black tea. It was rotten but it kept him awake. He built a cigarette. Beyond the steamy window nothing moved. Tucker was still busy in the office; the lamp burned steadily. Curtains were drawn on the cabin next door. An occasional Cree ghost drifted across the white clearing snow, eyeing Cody's window. Tantlak sat statuelike by his fire. It was too still. Cody sat smoking, the Colt on the table beside him. Eight cigarettes later he heard the footsteps.

They belonged to two people—one stride heavy and long, the other quick and light and trying to keep pace. Cody's hand covered the gun. The door opened. He relaxed. Brando's lips stretched thin with the smile.

"No second mistake, Glory-boy."

Cody let it go. He watched Morna close the door and stand with her back to it. Her expression was just right, timid but anxious for talk, dark eyes moving hopefully from him to Brando.

"She's got evidence?" Cody asked.

Brando drank from the canteen, set it down.

"You're looking at an eye-witness."

Cody didn't smile back. The girl's lips opened; her breasts rose and fell under the tight blouse. Brando's tone was too gentle.

"It's all right, Morna. Tell him."

She crossed to the table. The movement looked impulsive. Her voice trembled. "I have been hoping so long. I thought the Company would never send someone."

"You know about the missing pelts?" Cody asked.

"Mr. Brando said you would help me." She made the name sound like a prayer. "For two winters, my husband, this . . . animal, has sent many men on treks far north of here; Indian trains with packs of a hundred skins each. He said the furs went to the Company, but the nearest Post lies south. So I knew. He was hiding them . . . somewhere."

Cody's expression did not change. "And the Indians?"

Brando was impatient. "You know how he kept them quiet."

Without answering Cody poured whiskey into a cup and offered it to Morna. She shook her head, eyes wide, uncertain. He drank it himself and stared at her. "I don't know one thing," he said. "I don't know why you kept quiet."

Color rose warmly along her cheeks. She turned to Brando. "I do not understand. I try to help and you turn against me."

It was convincing. A nerve twitched in Brando's jaw.

"Damn it, Cody, she's willing to stand evidence for the Company."

"After keeping quiet for two years."

Softly, Morna said, "You forget my husband's reputation. I am a woman. Much easier to torture and kill than a Cree brave. You've got to believe me! If you leave me here now . . ."

A thick voice said, "He'll believe you."

Something happened to Morna's face. It was no longer young and lost. The eyes hardened; through drawn lips her teeth showed small and white and predatory. Cody sat very still. Brando's hand inched down to the thonged holster.

Tucker said, "You won't need that, chechako."

He stood short and square in the doorway, cradling the double-barreled shotgun; the muzzle was trained on Brando's chest. Tucker had that fat smile in place but his breath came in ragged wheezes and under the blond beardstubble his skin was gray and dead-looking. Little gusts of wind swooped in from the compound, ruffling his thin lank hair. He eyed the girl.

"They'll believe you, Little Minx. Men always do."

The raw tone made Morna step back and breathe, "Dix . . ." Brando didn't move; the shotgun hadn't lost bead.

Tucker nodded. "Little Morna always had a way with the boys. And a real business head. Smart. Quick." The grin went lopsided. "Smart enough to see the tide

turn and switch colors, eh, little Minx?"

Nobody said anything. His face was sweating as he advanced; his mouth was wet. It was crazy, but he looked as if he might cry. Cody leaned slowly forward in the chair. Tucker didn't notice anything but the girl.

"Smart enough to knife a fat old man in the back when a pretty-boy chechako comes along. Testify against me, eh? Maybe you'd like to hear some real testimony, gentlemen."

Morna had backed away. Now she stood flat against the wall, a cornered she-wolf, her beauty wild and bare-fanged.

"He's lying, Dix! Trying to drag me down with him! He hasn't hurt me enough."

TUCKER laughed; it wasn't a normal sound. The gun-barrel swung abruptly to Morna. She screamed. Cody made his move. He went in low. Tucker staggered sidewise and swore. Cody brought up a pile-driving left; knuckles dug into the thick midriff. Cody saw the clubbed rifle stock coming and pain sliced across his head just over the ear. He sank to one knee. The kerosene lamp went out of focus. Tucker was a blurred shadow wheeling for the door. Brando took three steps and halted with the shotgun against his belly. Tucker backed out. The door slammed. Cody felt hot stickiness run down behind his ear. He made his feet. Brando had the Colt free and the door flung wide. Two shots rocked in the stillness and the lamp vibrated shrilly. Brando cursed and levelled the Colt again.

Cody said, "We want him alive. We want those skins."

It wasn't necessary. Brando didn't fire again; his face was dead white; his eyes flared.

"He made the Headquarters cabin," Brando said.

He turned to Morna. Sobbing, hands covering her face, she leaned against him. Brando said softly, "We'll get him, Morna."

Over her shoulder, Cody's gaze held his. For a second, Beth was in the room again. Cody turned to the table and poured a drink. Finally the girl stopped crying. Wide innocent eyes looked up at Brando.

"He'll barricade the office. He's got a small arsenal in there."

Brando went to the sledpack. He broke the Winchester, checked the load, and snapped it shut. The metallic click sounded loud in frozen quiet. Brando headed for the door. "I don't mind blasting him out."

Cody set the canteen down hard. "No guns. There're other ways."

Pale eyes slitted; Brando's mouth worked. No words came. Cody took the Colt from the table and hitched it into his belt. He went out through the open door. The girl stared at Brando. After a minute, they followed.

Tiny puffs of powdery topsnow lifted on the night wind across the clearing. A tangle of torn brush rolled into their path; Brando kicked it impatiently; it bounced away and came to rest against a hitchpost. Cody took several strides and halted. The compound had been empty. It wasn't empty now.

Down at the south rim, beyond view of Headquarters, the Crees stood in a long motionless line. Smouldering faggot-glow played across gold armbands and hunger-gaunt faces. Eastward, in lodge shadows, the squaws stood silent, holding children close to ragged skirts. Over a score of bucks flanked the dark, lean tallness of Tantlak. They were armed to the teeth.

Brando cursed hoarsely. Cody heard the girl draw a sharp breath. Without a word, alone, he went on across the compound. It was a long walk. His mukluks made sad crunching noises. The office windows were black, but there was no movement, no quicksilver glint of rifle-metal

The Crees muttered. One brave drew his hunting knife. Cody came on steadily. He stopped in front of the Chief. He spoke in dialect.

"You will not stop us, now."

The Indians made an unsure, animal sound. Tantlak raised one hand. The sound quit. The Chief stared at Cody. "The white man will talk."

Cody's mouth felt dry. He met the black stare.

"Tucker is finished. We know everything of the torture and theft. He hides now like a wolf at bay, waiting to be taken to face the white man's law."

Moccasins shifted in the snow; behind Indian masks, hope flickered.

Tantlak was expressionless. "And when

Tucker is gone?"

"There will be a new Factor," Cody said. "A just man. There will be no more fear. There will be salmon and deermeat and true payment for the riches of your traps. Your tribe will not decay and go down into the earth."

A papoose whimpered and was hushed by its mother. The silence was complete. Once, wavering, Tantlak stared past Cody to Brando and the girl. Then, deliberately, he unsheathed his knife and held the hilt toward Cody.

"Fear is like the black hole dug by the snake's fang. It must be cut out. We are with you."

Quickly now, Brando crossed the clearing, the smile fixed in icehard eyes. Morna stayed close to him, never in range of the Headquarters windows. She did not look at the Crees.

"All right," Brando snapped. "Enough palaver for one night." He swung to the Chief. "If you're with us, you take orders."

Tantlak looked at him, nodded slowly. Brando gripped the rifle tight.

"Your men are armed. More than twenty-to-one against Tucker. Get the women clear. We mean to charge."

A low rumble ran among the Indians. Tantlak did not move. A vein stood out in Brando's forehead. "You heard the order."

Tantlak shook his head. "We are not afraid to die in battle. Yet we do not walk like blind fawns to certain slaughter." The black stare turned calmly to Cody. "We will take commands from the leader."

Brando's face stopped being handsome. He took a step toward the Chief. Cody stepped between them. "Put the gun up, Dix."

Brando didn't. In the grove beyond the lodges, the screechowl cried.

"Put it up," Cody said.

Brando did. Cody said, "The Indian's right. That door's made of two-inch planks, probably barricaded. Tucker could pick them off like flies."

The tension eased. Brando didn't meet the girl's glance.

"Maybe you got a better plan."

"A plan that won't cost a massacre." Cody looked at Morna. "There's an entrance from your cabin."

She nodded.

"A back door?"

She nodded again. Cody swung back to Brando and the Chief.

"You'll stay here. Tucker can't see you. He'll worry. Wait for a charge. He won't expect one man from the back way."

Brando smiled thinly. "And you're the man."

Cody spun the Colt's barrel, checking the chambers. "We want Tucker breathing. He's going to tell us where he cached those pelts."

He thought Morna's eyes widened briefly, switching to Brando.

Brando kept grinning. "Glory-hogging again."

Cody said, "There's a job to do. I don't figure to kill Indians doing it." He turned to Tantlak. "I'll yell if I need you."

The Cree nodded. That was all.

Without looking at Brando or the girl Cody headed back through the chill dark of the grove beyond the lodges.

He tried to shut out thought. He tried to forget the silent questioning look that had passed from Morna to Brando. He circled the Post widely. Blue-green branches shuddered with his passing, dropping small, muted avalanches of snow and brittle needles. He cleared the spruce stand at the north end, beyond the office cabin, cutting west and south again through the high shielding passes of tundras.

Malemutes kiyi-ed in the corral behind Headquarters. His fingers felt numb on the carved hilt of Tantlak's knife. The wind bit at his face. Ahead now he saw Morna's cabin, low against the tall stone finger of the Headquarters chimney. There were no lights. He was halfway to the back door when the firing started.

Cody cursed and broke into a run. In the compound Cree guns flared orange against the night. A heavier rifle hammered steadily in Tucker's office. Pain screams lifted wild and drained away to moans but the Indians kept firing. Cody shouldered into the small cabin and down the dark connecting passage. The screams got worse. One Cree let out a high agonized wail and the cry of a squaw answered.

Cody felt sick. Over and over his mind said, "The fool, the damn gun-crazy fool!" The office was black and the stink of burnt powder bit his nostrils. He moved slow and careful. Against the gray square of the east window he glimpsed Tucker levering steel into the smoking rifle chambers, shouldering the butt. In the sharp flame of the shot he saw the broad face. Tucker was laughing.

Outside, over the screams, Brando's hoarse voice rattled commands. Tucker kept firing. Cody edged forward as sound thundered in the cabin, a sound heavier than the gun-roar. The door planks sagged inward and shuddered. Brando shouted again; the battering-ram exploded against the planks. Tucker grated, "Indian rats!" and pumped the rifle. The ram shot home again. Flatly, in the next brief silence, Cody said, "That's all, mister."

Tucker's head swivelled wildly; the jowls and mouth were gray in the window light; the laugh didn't re-echo. He lunged forward, trying to wheel; he wasn't made for fancy footwork. The massive torso lurched as he brought up the gun-barrel. Cody was in under it, jarring the muzzle high, slamming out with a backhand right. The rifle bellowed and, overhead, glass tinkled and the hangdown lamp swung crazily. Cody's left found soft gut and wind jolted out of Tucker; he lunged back, arms flung wide; a chair-leg shattered under his reeling weight.

Some of the wounded were still screaming. The cabin rumbled with the ram's impact; the heavy doorbar gave and cracked. Tucker was on his feet, wheezing like a wounded musk-ox, circling Cody for the charge. Cody set his feet as the door splintered and crashed wide, spilling moonglow into darkness. Hulking low in the light, Tucker closed in. Then, beyond him, in the doorway, another figure squared off, lifting a rifle. Cody yelled, "No, Dix!" It was lost in the ripping blast of the gun.

Tucker stopped dead and stared stupidly at nothing. Brando fired again. A bullet in the spine straightened Tucker convulsively. He rocked on his heels for a moment, then fell like a damp-rotten log. He tumbled over on his back and lay still. A fallen whiskey bottle came to rest near one clawed hand, the liquid draining slowly from its shattered neck.

Cody was breathing hard. His lips were a taut thread. He bent down. Tucker's eyes were open. The first bullet had torn out the front just over the heart. Dark blood welled, soaking into the plaid mackinaw. Cody stood up and faced Brando.

"I said we'd take him alive."

The answer was slow in coming. Brando's back was to the light. Cody could not see his expression but the tone of faint surprise sounded real.

"It was him or you, Cody. Maybe you ought to thank me."

"Maybe." Cody looked down at the dead sagging face. "He could've told us everything. Now, there's only . . ."

He cut it short, looked at Brando quickly, then shouldered out through the door.

IV

THE SNOW was red with paling stains that trailed across the compound. A child cried and a silent brave sat holding his crushed knee between his hands. Tucker's fire had caught one Cree full in the mouth; an old squaw sat cradling his ruined head in her arms. She did not cry; her face was empty. Two Indian woman tried to make her come away. She sat there. At the south edge, Tantlak watched Cody and Brando advance; his arm was bleeding under the torn buckskin tunic; he didn't notice. Turned on Brando, his eyes were dull and sick.

"There are six dead. Three were no more than striplings."

"You don't win battles without losses," Brando said.

Cody's gaze raked the clearing, came back to Brando.

"Where is she?"

Brando looked puzzled.

"The girl. Where is she?"

The pale stare flattened. "I wasn't guarding her. I had my own troubles."

"She got away."

"I told you once. She didn't know anything."

Cody kept looking at him. "First

Tucker. Now the girl. The only two that could lead us to the cache."

Brando went rigid; he took a stride toward Cody, then drew up, calm again, with the Winchester resting in the fold of his arm.

"You worry too much, Cody. Maybe it's my deal from here in."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The wounded had quit moaning. The old squaw still sat cradling the dead boy's head. Slowly, now, in the white silence of the compound, Cody felt it: a change in Brando, a harder self-assurance. Cody turned to the Cree Chief. Tantlak looked away.

"I will see to the digging of graves."

"I told you not to charge," Cody yelled at him.

The Indian started away. Cody snagged his arm.

"Do you always send your children to slaughter?"

It hit home. Old, half-buried pride flared. Tantlak freed his arm. The black gaze reached past Cody to Brando.

"There were other orders," the Cree said. "Orders from him who will be the new Factor of Chandindu."

Cody turned. Brando was smiling.

"That's the story, Cody. I talked to Mackenzie the night before we rolled out. Mac remembers old friends—and promises. 'Do a good job, Dix. We'll need a new boss for that Post'."

Cody stood there. A sinew in his jaw tensed and relaxed and tensed again.

"I talked to Beth, too," Brando said. "She'll come up now that it's over. Bring that circuit-riding Preacher along." He looked at the dark hulk of Headquarters. "We'll be married in our new . . ."

Cody hit him hard across the mouth. Brando went back a step but the gun didn't come up.

"Part payment for six dead Crees," Cody said. "There's more to answer for."

Carefully Brando remade the smile. Their eyes held. Cody's voice was too quiet.

"I could ride back to Fortymile. I could tell Mackenzie about a dead Factor. A prisoner that just happened to escape. A fortune in furs that we never found. He might wonder why you . . ."

Brando shook his head. "You're not the type. Besides he wouldn't listen. Neither would Beth. I performed my duty as I saw it, Cody. Nobody listens to the crooked lies of a jealous suitor."

"And the pelts?"

Brando laughed. "There's time. I'll locate the cache. I'll turn the furs over to the Company."

Cody stared at him for a long time.

"Sure," he said flatly. "Sure you will."

Brando laughed.

IT DIDN'T take long. The Crees were still filling graves when Brando started to move in. He sat by the west window at Tucker's rolltop desk, in Tucker's swivel chair. He smoked, watching the Indians struggle under the old trunks, hauling them to the bonfire at the center of the clearing. The last of Tucker went up in russet flames that colored the office window, leapt higher in the raw wind that swept south from the tundras.

The office was quiet. Cody did not talk. He sat at the table, under the new glass-chimneyed lamp. From time to time he refilled the whiskey jigger at his elbow. The liquor got to him, burning his throat and chest; it didn't make him feel better. It didn't make Brando's smile easier to take.

Brando watched the slow pulsing of bonfire glare. He looked at the fresh-scrubbed floorplanks and furniture, the gaudy Indian blankets decorating the walls, the daguerreotype of Beth on the chimney-piece.

He grinned. "She'll like it. She'll like it fine."

Cody drank. Brando's voice was like a taunting nettle, pricking and waiting and pricking again.

"She wrote a letter. She gave it to the Cree when he got to Fortymile with my report. She says Mackenzie thinks we did a damn good job."

"We?" Cody said. "Don't get generous. It ill-becomes you."

Brando laughed, riding gently in the swivel chair. He had the look of a gambler with all the chips and a pat hand.

"She'll be here tomorrow with the Preacher."

Cody didn't answer.

"So it's all settled." Brando lifted a paper from the desk—a long letter in official-looking script. "My appointment as Factor, a home, a wife, contented Indian trappers."

"Sure." Cody's eyes came up quick and hard. "The Crees are tickled to death. What's a few casualties in a noble cause?"

Brando rose and came to the table. He filled a jigger and lifted it, his gaze mocking over the rim.

"Yes, sir. All we need is a best man."

Cody set his glass down hard. His eyes narrowed. After a minute, he got up and walked out. He didn't look back. He knew Brando would be standing there, still smiling.

The sled came the next morning. The rubdown porch of Headquarters had been half-decorated by the Indians. They hadn't finished the job. Squaws sat silent under the flies of empty lodges Tantlak stood near his tent, circled by a knot of staring, hardfaced bucks. They watched the sled tilt its nose up and then down over the final rise and round the south bend of the spruce grove. Nobody laughed or cheered.

Cody rolled a cigarette. In the cold shade of the porch, Brando frowned at the unfinished trimmings of quillworked robes and tanned hides and bright-hued beads.

Steel blades squealed to a halt and malemutes jumped in the traces or squatted for a rest, panting. The Preacher stood by the geepole, tall and bone-thin, with a solemn smile on his face. Beth climbed out of the fur-covered seat and tossed back the hood of her parka. Her hair glistened in the brittle northern sunlight, like warm whiskey to a man numbed by Arctic trailwind and snow. She waved one mittened hand.

Brando ran down the steps. Cody stood smoking. He saw Brando catch Beth in his arms and whirl her about, heard the sound of her laughter, full and clear in the morning stillness. The Indians watched, waiting. Slowly, Cody walked out to the sled.

Preacher Cotton was booming in a righteous kindly voice, but behind their pouches, his eyes kept flicking uneasily to Tantlak and the circle of Cree braves Beth laughed, her hand warm in Cody's.

"Isn't it wonderful? Captain Mac was so pleased with Dix's report."

"I can imgaine," Cody said.

She linked arms with Brando. "We're really grateful for the way you helped Dix."

Cody only nodded. His chest felt tight. He wanted to smash that satisfied grin from Brando's face Maybe Beth felt the tension; she paused, uncertain. The Preacher coughed and she followed his unquiet glance to the watching Indians. Now her voice sounded a little too bright.

"You'll stay for the wedding tomorrow, Cody?"

Brando laughed, hugging her close. "Didn't I tell you? Cody's going to be best man. Aren't you?"

Cody managed a smile. So did Beth, but it was strained. Her eyes searched Brando's face. It was as though she were looking at someone she didn't quite know.

Brando said, "You'll be wanting a toddy after that long trek, eh, Preacher?"

Cotton bent his solemn mouth. "I suppose it is in order? A toast to the happy couple."

They started across the compound. The squaws sat quiet, with no chatter or smiles for Beth. The braves drew closer, a tight wall behind Tantlak. Halfway to the cabin Brando halted. He looked at the Cree Chief and his grin flattened. "Just a minute," he said.

Beth glanced quick from him to Cody. "Dix . . ."

Brando didn't wait. He moved in short choppy strides, his hand swinging free just over the holstered .45. The Indians didn't stir. Preacher Cotton muttered something. It sounded like a prayer.

Brando spoke very clearly. "I told you the decorations were to be finished. I told you the squaws were to cook a special dinner."

Tantlak eyed him without blinking "My people are in mourning. They have no cause for celebration."

Cody saw Brando pale; the square jaw clamped shut. "The hell you say! Maybe you didn't savvy. I'm giving the orders

here. Things are changed."

"You say they are changed. My people wonder. A different man rules Chandindu, yes." Black eyes swung across the glittering Compound to Beth. "But not a different woman."

The words slurred. Beside Cody the girl lifted her hand and let out a small hurt cry. "Dix . . . no." Cody swore and took a step forward. Brando struck out again. The Indian spilled sideward, his head jarring; hunger-weak legs gave under him. Cree braves surged forward like a roused pack. Brando's knuckles went livid around the Colt butt. He could have fired from the hip. The Crees didn't come any nearer. Without taking his eyes from them Brando reached down and hauled Tantlak to his feet. The Chief moaned. Cody felt Beth's grip tighten on his arm. In a low flat voice, Brando said, "The decorating will be done. The food will be cooked. Tomorrow there will be a celebration."

Tantlak didn't answer. His eyes had a fixed, finished look. Cody had seen the look before—when Black Tucker was living.

Brando turned and walked back to Beth. His skin was flushed. He smiled. Beth's head moved from side to side, unbelieving.

"Dix . . . Did you have to . . ."

"You'll get used to it, lady. Somebody has to control these damn . . ."

The Preacher coughed. "But, my boy . . ."

Brando's glance cut him short. The lips kept smiling; the pale eyes didn't.

"You're here to preach a wedding, Cotton. That's all."

"Well, how about that toddy?"

THEY went on toward Headquarters. Cody and the Preacher walked a little to the rear. Ahead, Brando had his arm about Beth's shoulder again. But she wasn't as close to him as she had been.

At twilight, the cabin was dark. They ate by candlelight. The flames were tall and thin, glittering on the glass candlelabra Beth had brought from Fortymile, catching fire in the brazen designs of Cree blankets that draped the walls. There was rich food and a bottle of Skagway wine sent up for the wedding by Captain Mackenzie. Cody drank without tasting it. Vaguely the booming jokes of the Preacher came to him; he heard himself answer. It seemed unreal. Nothing was real but Beth's eyes, meeting his time and again, dark and questioning, glancing quickly away, as if afraid of an answer.

Her gown made small rustling sounds; her skin was cool and white by candleglow and her voice like the sudden thaw of a late-spring freshet here in the lonely Arctic reaches. But she spoke too often, anxious to fill the long silences; her smile was fixed and trembling. Brando didn't notice. After half-a-bottle his tone got loud and heavily mocking. Once a squaw nearly spilled a steaming soupbowl. The sharp flare of his eyes wasn't nice to see. He drank some more. Cody was glad when the meal ended.

Outside it was better. Dusk wind stirred the powdered topsnow of the compound. Cody breathed deep and leaned against the split log porch-rail. He made and lit a cigarette, frowning through the smoke at the completed decorations, the smouldering lodge fires far across the clearing.

Beth's slippers made little noise on the rough planking. He could smell the violet-scented freshness of her hair. They did not look at each other. For a time she stood by the rail, watching the lifeless compound. Softly, she said,

"The Preacher's a chess expert. Dix bet he could beat him."

Cody made a smile. Behind them in the cabin Brando's voice was boisterous and whiskey-edged. They heard the clink of bottle and glass. Cody smoked, waiting, conscious that they both waited for something. Beth kept watching the clearing. Finally it came.

"What's happened to him, Cody? He's so . . . different."

He half-turned to her, ready to speak. The lost puzzled look of her face stopped him. He shrugged.

"A man likes to show-off for his bride-to-be."

Beth shook her head. "That Indian. He looked weak and sick. He couldn't even fight back."

Cody didn't answer. The bellow of

Brando's laugh rolled out into gray stillness. It took her a long time but she said it.

"And the words he used . . . before Dix hit him. He said . . . 'not a different woman' . . ." Abruptly, she turned to him, her eyes bright again, probing. "It meant something, Cody. You know what it meant."

Gently, Cody said, "Listen, Beth. Don't get hurt."

She was very close. He could feel her breathing.

"I don't know," she murmured. "I never knew a man like Dix. I thought I loved him. But when I saw the way he . . . Maybe even before the Indian, I sensed something . . . something wrong. Cody . . ."

She swayed nearer, her lips parted, her eyes deep and warm.

Then she turned away.

"It's no good, Cody."

"I know."

"He's sick inside. He needs me. I can't leave him now."

Cody ground his cigarette into the rail; a tiny shower of red sparks drifted down, dying in the snow. Her hand touched the whipcord sleeve.

"But . . . Cody, I'm all mixed up."

He looked at her.

"Cody . . ."

Then she was in his arms, her body soft and pliant against him, her hands cool on his face. Her lips were soft and answering. His arms tightened.

"A pretty pose, Glory-boy. A touching picture."

The girl drew a sharp breath. Cody let her go. Brando stood in the doorway; the light behind him glowed palely on his hair. His eyes had a drunken glitter. They could hear the slow rasp of his breathing.

It would have been better if he'd shouted, struck out in fury. He stood there, weaving slightly, smiling.

"A bit early, Cody. You don't kiss the bride till after the wedding."

Beth's gown rustled as she moved toward him. "Dix."

"Quite all right, my dear. A harmless little fling. Didn't mean to butt in. The Preacher got sleepy and went to bed."

She shook her head. Even in the yellow glare of the doorway she looked pale. Her mouth quivered. Without another word she brushed past Brando into the cabin. He stepped aside with a taunting bow.

Cody waited, his feet set wide, his eyes level.

"You're all wrong, Brando. She's confused, but she'll stick. She's that kind. She thinks you need her."

Brando smiled. "Like I said—touching." The corner of the smile twitched. "There's dust in the office safe. I'll pay you off tonight. I reckon we'll do without a best man."

Lean jaw muscles knotted. He started for Brando, then, slowly, relaxed. Something went out of his eyes. Let it go, his mind said. Maybe she's right; maybe it couldn't work—you and Beth. She's not made for running away from promises. Maybe it's better this way—for her.

He followed Brando into the office.

The birch fire was low; corner shadows were cold and black and melted wax had stained the glass candlelabra. Cody glanced past the beaded curtain; far down the connecting hall a bar of light showed under Beth's door. He thought he could hear the muted sound of her crying.

Brando stooped over the fat-bellied floorsafe; the tumblers rolled and clicked. On the table the dinner dishes looked stale and ugly. Cody poured three fingers. It didn't warm him. Brando brought the dust pouch and a small scale to the table. It was very quiet. The spilling gold spangles made a tinny drumming in the tray. The scale dipped. Brando emptied it into a second pouch and threw it across the table. Candle flames wavered with the breath of his movement. Cody did not touch the pouch. He eyed Brando.

"The pay-off," he said. "This settles everything."

"Everything. You finish a job, you mush on. There's a calico pony in the shed. You'll move quicker with him."

Cody weighted the pouch in one palm. His tone stayed even.

"Maybe you ought to do the same."

Brando had lifted the bottle, measuring wine against firelight. He set it down.

There was no expression in his face.

"Let's say what we mean."

Cody kept it soft. "Don't get in too deep, Brando. Clear out now—while you can. Beth wants you. All right. But I wouldn't like to see her hurt."

The grin was forced. "You think I'm crazy?"

"Maybe not. But you're heading down a one-way trail. I've seen what power can do to men—decent, honest chechakos with good intentions. Then they get too much power in their fists. It goes black inside and rots like frostbite. The good intentions peel away." He set the pouch on the table. "Get out, Dix. Take Beth with you. Together you can make a better life somewhere . . . anywhere but here . . ."

Brando just stared. This time the raw laugh was real.

"And you call me crazy! Walk out on a sweet set-up like this? Listen, Cody. I'm boss, now. I got a good house, good grub, the best whiskey. I'm going to have a wife. I'm going to make this God-forsaken hole pay."

"In more ways than one."

A log-skeleton sagged on the hearth. The smile faded.

"Talking in riddles again."

"Maybe," Cody said. "A lot of maybes. Maybe you're not figuring on more than an honest percentage. Maybe you did gun Tucker to save my hide. Maybe Morna's gone for good and never told you about that nice fat cache."

Brando had lost his schoolboy complexion.

He swayed a little, bracing his hands flat on the table.

"Still at it, Glory-boy. You'd like to steal my job with lies. You'd like to turn Beth against me. A jealous punk will do a lot of rotten . . ."

The short brutal left caught him square in the mouth. He reeled back, clutching at the tablecloth, dragging it with him. Plates and cups rattled along the floor. The wine bottle teetered and spilled dark red on the white linen. Closing in, Cody let go another left, feeling the power of it drive up from his planted feet. Brando grunted; his head lolled, doll-like, as he pitched against the log wall, clawing for support.

His lower lip was split; blood ran down his chin. He made panicky, whimpering noises and dragged the Colt free of leather. Cody's knee jammed the gunwrist against rough bark, grinding hard. Brando swore. The gun clattered to the floor. Collaring him with his right, Cody slammed the left back and forth across the bobbing face.

The beaded curtain rustled. "Cody!"

He stopped. He turned unsteadily, breathing fast, and faced Beth. There was blood on his knuckles. When he let go, Brando sagged, hanging against the wall, gasping air through the torn hole of his mouth. Cody shook his head. "Listen, Beth . . ."

Her face was quite still; there was nothing at all in her eyes. She went past him. She got Brando's arm around her shoulders and helped him to the couch by the fire. Cody stood there, watching, as she tore a strip from her petticoat and soaked it with whiskey. She bathed Brando's lips; he winked, his head rolling from side to side.

"Beth," Cody said.

She turned on him, the movement swift with pale anger.

"That was it," she said. "You just wanted to win. You couldn't stand losing."

Cody straightened. His voice was quiet. "If you see it that way."

She wavered, unsure for a moment; Brando coughed and groaned. Her mouth set again.

"He's sick. He needs help. Not a beating. I guess he was right. Jealousy's a pretty rotten thing."

It cut deep and hard. Cody didn't blink. He watched her bathe Brando's mouth with deft, gentle touches. After a time, he picked up the dustpouch and tucked it into his belt. At the door, he said, "I'll take the pony. I'll head out by sun-up."

He didn't wait for an answer.

V

GET OUT, his mind said. Saddle the calico and ride and keep riding. Only he wasn't listening to his mind.

He struck for the north cabin, past

the front gate of the dog corral. Malemutes lay sleeping, dug into small snowpits for warmth. The last gray light was gone. Beyond the winking sleepless stare of Cree fires, the ice-strangled river and lonely tundras reached away into empty darkness. Nothing, he thought. Beyond here, beyond Beth—nothing.

The cabin was cold. He lit the lamp wick. The potbellied stove was black with dead ashes. He didn't build a fire. He got the canteen and swallowed a stiff drink. He screwed on the lid and stood silent for a long time. His mouth worked. Abruptly, he let fly; the canteen clanked against the wall and rolled to rest in tangled bunkblankets. Cody lay down and shut his eyes. Why wait? Why hang around till morning? Don't kid yourself, Glory-boy. Morning won't be better. He could see that grinning mask against his closed eyelids. He could hear that cool, taunting laugh . . .

"Shut up!"

The lamp vibrated to the ragged sound of his voice.

He took another drink. Forget, he told himself. Sleep and forget a moment in the blue shadows of the porch and the arch of Beth's body to his circling arm, the deep promise of her lips parted under his. It didn't mean a thing. Not a thing. Just a mixed-up kid needing a shoulder to cry on. Good old Cody; the man with the friendly shoulder. Damn good old Cody! The canteen tilted. A little whiskey spilled along his jaw. He wiped it away. Forget this morning, too. Shut out the memory of uneasy fear in her eyes when Brando butchered the Cree. Get rid of the notion that the whole mess is twisted and wrong. Forget.

In the end, the liquor got to him. The lamp glow swayed with the soughing cabin drafts and went far away. He dozed. It was like dreaming. Something had roused the huskies; one dog yapped and whined endlessly. There was a creek of steel runners on packed snow and somewhere a door closed. Cody jolted to a sitting position. He felt sweat along the small of his back. The lamp wick simmered low. There was no sound at all. He swore silently. Nerves. Waiting and nerves. With a sudden, final movement he got up.

It didn't take long to pack the saddle roll. It was not thinking, now. It was moving, acting, letting it all go for good. There was no emotion in Cody's face as he hauled on mukluks and parka. The kerosene flame still burned. He ignored it. Outside there was no moon; the sky hung black and heavy and there was a tang of snow in the air that ripped down from the Barrens. A light still gleamed in Brando's office, but the window of Beth's room was dark. Cody didn't look at it. He headed for the corral.

At first he didn't notice the sled. He started toward the clapboard leanto where the calico was stalled. Then the fresh scars of sled blades printed themselves across his consciousness. He frowned, turning to follow them. The sled had been parked in black shadow by the rear cabin wall. Its seat was loaded with a heavy grub pack and sleeping bag; the malemutes, bright-eyed with hunger and a long haul, were still lashed in the traces. The sled didn't belong at Chandindu.

Cody crossed to the shed. It was dark inside and heavy with the odor of stale mash and horse nitrogen. The calico whinneyed, blowing against the raw wind from the door. Cody gentled it, reaching up to the peg-hung saddle. His hands stopped halfway. His mouth went stiff.

The sounds came clear and sharp in night stillness—the murmuring jumble of footsteps in the softer corral snow. Cody stood in black shadows behind the calico's stall. A long minute passed. Restless dogs whimpered in the corral. The warped leanto door groaned wider, then shut and the sound of breathing was loud in the dark. A lamp-shutter creaked shrilly; a wedge of light cut across the shed. Cody could see Brando's pale face. The eyes were harsh with damned-up fury. So was the voice.

"I told you to stay away."

Nobody answered.

"The calico's here. Cody won't ride out 'til morning. You should've waited."

The other figure was motionless, back to Cody, short and thickset in a man's parka and mukluks.

Brando said, "There's Beth, too. If she gets curious . . ."

The short figure moved forward, half-turning. The front of the parka was open; the hood fell back. Thick russet hair gleamed, framing the soft white face and throat, the red, smiling lips. The body under mannish clothes was all woman. Morna's smile twisted.

"Yes. The sweet innocent Beth. It would never do . . ."

"You should've waited," Brando snapped. "A week to be safe."

"Some things won't wait."

An uneasy scowl edged anger out of Brando's stare.

Morna said, "I'm heading for the cache tonight."

"Trouble?"

"Not yet. There could be. If Jessup gets wind of Tucker's death he might lose his head. I have to get to him before anyone else. I have to tell him nothing's changed."

The shed was cold but sweatbeads glistened under Brando's eyes.

"He won't balk?"

Morna laughed. It should have been throaty and clinging to match her soft woman's face. It wasn't.

"Jessup takes orders," she said. "He guards the cache and gets his cut. Tucker's finished. You're taking over with me. That's all."

She moved closer to Brando, her voice lowering.

"Another year and we ship the furs out. A Yukon steamer Captain buys them. No strings, no questions asked. Then, it's the top, Dix. Then it's you and me and a fortune."

Her mouth was open, turned up to his. Her eyes had a hungry animal look. Brando didn't kiss her. He smiled crookedly.

"And no tricks? I can trust the little minx?"

The eyes widened sharply, unsheathed claws. "Trust! That's my line, isn't it? How can I be sure of you? What about this sweet bit of fluff?"

Breath went out of her as Brando drew her close; his arm tightened under the loose parka.

"She's nothing, Morna. You know it. I knew it the minute I saw you. She's a front, a pretty domestic picture to show the Company. Like you said. One more year and . . ."

His mouth covered hers. Long white fingers clawed, burying themselves in his hair, holding the kiss. Cody could hear them breathing.

In a thick whisper, Brando said, "Let me know how you make out."

Morna nodded, wet red lips smiling. "Wait up for me. I'll be back."

The heavy mannish clothes muttered. Then she was gone. The door swung to, thumping idly; the calico stirred and the stallion in the next stall nickered. For a long time Brando did not move. His face was clear in the lantern glare. He was smiling too.

Cody's mouth had a bad taste. Something burned behind his eyes and one fist clamped hard on the stall post. He wanted to let go, feel that damn grin smash and break again under driving knuckles. He didn't. Evidence, his mind rasped. None of it's any good without evidence. The cache; the skins Tucker had pirated and Brando figured to build higher with another season of theft; Morna was heading out now by dogsled. Sure. She wouldn't be hard to trail. If the snow held off, the calico could catch up.

It took time. It took a lifetime of waiting minutes. He thought Brando would never move. Even with Brando gone, alone in the dark, saddling was slow, careful work. He led the calico out through the rear corral gate. He didn't swing astride till he was well clear of the Post. The calico was fresh. So was the long, weaving trace of paw-churned snow between purplish ribs cut by runners. It struck dead north across river ice toward the Barrens.

A shrill wind was rising. The calico drove forward, head down, blowing against the needling cut of it. Once a foreleg buckled and lurched the pony too near the rim of a sunken drift. Cody hauled taut on the reins, wheeling back to the trail that reached up through black spruce stands to a higher plateau of dead white silence. The wind got higher. The

sled-marks blurred with shifting snow; the calico broke through tangled brush into the clear and ahead, abruptly, the land reared in a steep hill that ended above the snow valley, a sheer cliff overhanging a two-hundred-foot drop to ice-capped boulders. Cody drew in sharply.

The cabin was on a deep ledge, set back from the frozen lip of the cliff. Windows blinked light like the eyes of a crouched wolf and pale smoke blew in heavy clouds from the chimney. It was a good spot. A spot where a single man with a rifle could command the valley on every side.

Cody sat quiet at the grove-edge eyeing the twin runner-ribbons that slid out and up the violent grade toward the cabin. He could circle; maybe, in darkness, he could take the cabin from the rear. Maybe. But, there was a sound now in the wind, a low, beating voice: Wait up for me, I'll be back . . . His jaw set. Before dawn, the evidence and the skin-pirates, all in one neat bundle. He swung the calico south along the back-trail and dug in his heels.

THE CREE councilfire had dwindled to throbbing orange faggots. Beside it Tantlak sat crosslegged, chin buried in his bony chest. A raw gust flurried across the compound; he did not stir under his skins. But his eyes moved slow and sleepless toward the north cabin.

Cody swung down and tethered the calico to a rail. The chief watched him unbutton the parka and draw back the right side. When Cody walked the thonged Colt rode clear, just under his fingertips. Halfway across the clearing, their eyes met. Cody kept moving. The Cree did not try to stop him.

Long easy strides took him through the puddle of light that spilled from the office window. The porch boards sagged, faintly complaining about his weight. His breath came even. He didn't hesitate. His knuckles rapped quietly on the door planks.

Nothing happened. Across the deserted compound, Tantlak watched. Cody knocked again. Inside, a chair scraped softly and the heavy crossbar slid back. The door edged open.

"Mor . . ."

Brando didn't finish. He had begun a smile. He didn't finish that, either. He went back several steps. Cody shut the door and leaned against it. Brando stood in the middle of the floor. His skin had a gray look about the eyes, the drawn lips. Behind him, the hangdown lamp swung in a lazy circle. Brando's voice was harsh.

"I told you to clear out."

"Keep it down," Cody told him.

"What the hell . . ."

"I said quiet!" Cody glanced at the black hall beyond the restless beaded curtain. "Let her sleep. It's better that way. She's had enough trouble."

Brando frowned, then tried another grin. "I don't get you."

"Don't you?"

The bottle was on the green desk blotter. Cody walked over and measured a long one. He drank. He could feel Brando staring, waiting.

Without turning, he said, "I located Tucker's cache."

No answer. The lamp creaked on its restless chain. He thought Brando's breathing missed a beat. Brando moved slowly to the swivel chair.

"Good job. Mackenzie'll be glad to hear . . ."

"Some things he won't. Some things people said in the corral shed."

Brando didn't blink. He sat down, his hand on the chair-arm, close to a half-shut drawer of the rolltop.

"You can't prove it, Cody."

"A cabin in the Barrens is proof. And Morna won't sing love songs when she knows you figured to turn her in if the going got too . . ."

It broke off sharply. Cody made a quick move toward the desk. Brando's hand was quicker. The drawer jarred wide. The little derringer looked lost in his fist. The business-end centered on Cody's middle. He quit moving.

The swivel hinge groaned as Brando eased back. He smiled but the tic kept twitching in his cheek.

"That's your trouble, Glory-boy: too much honesty. You should've shot first, then explained to Mackenzie. A little

mistake that changes everything. Now I do the shooting. It won't be a nice story. The jealousy that twisted your mind, made you pull a gun on me. Not nice, but convincing."

He got to his feet smoothly, hobnails biting the planks, moving nearer Cody. The pale eyes had a fixed glassy brilliance. "This means a lot to me, Cody. I'm not settling for half-measures. Maybe you'd be satisfied with Beth and this pennyante hell-hole. Some people are always content to grub in the mud of the valley. Morna's different; so am I. We're going all the way, Glory-boy. We're going to the top of the mountain. And no valley-worm's going to stop . . ."

Cody moved fast. His left clamped on Brando's gunwrist, wrenching it wide; his right slammed in like a pile driver. Brando jackknifed forward and went back two steps, jarring into the desk. Cody was over him now, digging one elbow deep under the handsome jaw. The only sound was Brando's choking struggle for breath.

"The gun," Cody said.

Brando struggled. The elbow drove harder.

"Give me the gun."

He did. Cody's fingers closed on the small pearl butt. He backed away. Brando sank into the chair, holding his throat, coughing air into cramped lungs. The cold sweat of fear pocked his forehead. The dark red line of the healing split showed clear on his pale lower lip.

"All right," he said hoarsely. "You got it all now."

"I didn't want it this way, kid. You dealt the hand."

Brando stared up, white face suddenly very young and confused.

"Listen, Cody. I made mistakes. I thought a lot of crazy things. But, I didn't do anything."

Cody looked at him and felt a little sick. The voice was a desperate whisper now.

"You hear me, Cody? You got everything. All right; I made mistakes. Does that say I never get another chance?"

Cody was silent. Brando rose slowly. The words spilled out in a nervous jumble.

"It'd be better for Beth, wouldn't it, Cody? You said you didn't want her hurt. See? No court trial; no mud on her skirts. I just ride. I get out of the territory. I never come back."

Cody turned away from the bloodless sweating mask.

"No! You got to listen! Hell, Cody, I was all mixed up. When I got near that Morna bitch, something happened to me. You don't know her. She's like a poison in the blood. But, I never *did* anything. I gunned Tucker to save you. Honest to God, Cody, I never did . . ."

Flatly, through clamped teeth, Cody said, "Get out."

"You won't regret it."

"Get out of Alaska. Get out and stay out."

Brando got dressed. He didn't waste time. He kept throwing quick glances at Cody's stiff face. Cody stood at the table, not watching. At the door, Brando paused, started to speak. Cody looked at him. He got out. Cody filled a cup and drank as if to wash a bad taste from his mouth.

The room was very quiet. After a time, he heard huskies snapping and the jar of runners creaking free of ice-crust. Brando's "Haw!" was shrill and muted. Cody walked to the door and watched the sled wheel south and east, hurrying out of the compound. A few Cree braves had wakened to the night noises. They stared after Brando. Nobody tried to stop him. Cody closed the door.

It was right. Right for Beth. For everybody. But still . . . He poured another one but only stood there, frowning, swishing the amber liquid gently to and fro in the cup. Hell! Brando was young. A crooked woman could do crazy things to a chechako. Sure. Starting again in a new country, the kid would ride straight. Right. It had to be right.

The rest was waiting; sitting here, a welcoming committee that Morna didn't expect; taking her south to the authorities and turning the cache over to Mackenzie. Routine, he told himself. A routine that would end and time that would pass. Time for Beth to realize and forget. Time when he could be near and ready to help.

Thought snapped clean as broken ice.

Deliberately Cody stood up and faced the door. Outside, steel whined in the snow and was quiet. A second passed. Mukluks trod easy on the porchboards and the inner doorlatch tilted up. Morna started to speak. The words dried in her throat. Spots of color showed high on her cheekbones; the rest of her face was pale in the fur frame of the parkahood.

Cody said, "Shut the door."

She stood still, her eye narrowing. The lampchimney shivered in the draft.

"Brando won't like tricks," she said.

"Brando's gone."

The colorpatches flamed. Her mouth closed hard. "You're lying."

"He ran out, Morna. The dance is all yours now—and you pay the fiddler."

She came closer, small in the heavy mannish rig, her lips peeled back from white clamped teeth.

"You're a liar."

"Am I?"

"Liar!"

It was a shrill scream. Savage bewilderment shadowed the restless eyes.

"Dix wouldn't turn tail. It was all settled. Even that little mouse he meant to marry. All a front. It was him and me!"

Cody heard the soft intake of breath. His gaze swung to the curtained doorway. Beth swayed a little, staring at the girl, shaking her head in slow stubborn disbelief. Morna's red mouth went out of shape.

"You heard me, Miss Prim! Love you? A man like Dix? It was him and me. Dix and Morna. Get that, Cody? The two of us. Together. Straight down the line!"

"And this is the last stop," Cody said.

The parka hood fell away as she lunged for him, a cornered wolf with bared teeth and red hair flying wild. Cody sidestepped and caught her arms from behind. The grip was sure, unyielding. She struggled; heavy mukluks kicked back at his shins; she tried to bite him.

"Get one of the Indians, Beth. Tell him to come in," Cody said.

Numbly, she nodded and went to the door. Morna had quit fighting. She stood very still, drawing long, quivering breaths. A Cree brave came in with Beth. A .30-.30 rested in the bend of his arm. Cody let go of Morna.

"Take her to the north cabin. Lock her in. Stand guard till morning."

The Indian straightened; his eyes, on Cody, flickered with respect and old, fighting hope. Morna didn't say any more. She let the Cree lead her out. All the time her eyes stayed on the waiting .30-.30.

The cabin was still. For a time, Beth did not move. The soft, child-like bewilderment had not left her face. She looked at Cody.

"I thought he'd change . . . once we were . . ."

"I know," Cody said.

He crossed the room; his hands were gentle on her arms. Then, she cried, without a sound, deep inside, her face close against the patient strength of his shoulder. Finally she grew quiet. Dark, shining eyes came up to his.

"It was them . . . Dix and her . . . from the start?"

Cody told her the facts. He didn't color them. They were bad enough. He thought she might cry again. She only pressed his hand and made a small sad smile. She nodded.

"I was afraid. I guessed, but I couldn't be sure till I heard her."

VI

THE SCREAM was high and shrill, cutting outer darkness like the roar of a wounded bear. Cody stiffened. Beth's fingers closed tight on his. In the frozen moment of shock, a sharp totoo of hooves drummed across the packed snow of the compound. Cody said, "Damn!" and wheeled for the door. The clearing had gone wild with movement and a babble of Indian voices. Bucks brushed into the open through whispering tentflies and headed for the north cabin. Preacher Cotton came through the office in night shirt and trousers. "My boy, what . . .?" It stopped short as the cry of a squaw rose again.

Cody broke into a run, shouldering past the knot of Crees by the north cabin hitching post. The squaw was kneeling beside the Indian that Cody had set to guard Morna. Nobody had to explain. The hunting knife had bitten deep under the

left rib casing and sliced up toward the center of the chest. The wound gaped, still bleeding, but the Cree was beyond pain. Preacher Cotton was beside the squaw now; his lips moved in a silent prayer. Tantlak stood quiet on the edge of the crowd. His eyes held Cody's.

Alll Cody said was, "I'll get her."

The Chief did not answer.

Beth had reached the cabin. Cody turned, trying to cut the body from view. She saw it and pressed white knuckles to her lips. Cody steadied her. He looked at the hitching post.

"She took the calico. Fresher than her dog team."

Beth's eyes stared, questioning. He nodded.

"She's after Brando. It won't be pretty if she catches up.

"She wouldn't . . ."

His laugh was harsh. "She's been crossed, Beth. You don't cross a she-cat and get away scott free. She'll smile. She'll go into his arms. Then . . ."

His gaze moved to the red stain widening in the snow by the Cree's body. The squaw was still crying.

"Go in the house, Beth."

"Cody . . ."

"I'm tired. I'm done playing games. It has to be settled."

"But . . ."

The quiet determination of his face stopped her. He smiled once and kissed her lips. They were warm. He turned abruptly and crossed the clearing to the dog corral.

It was treacherous going. The huskies weren't rested. The storm had lowered, giving a dark glow to the tundras. Cody swore, squinting against the first biting needles of snow. The calico's trace cut south and east, paralleling the ribbons sliced by Brando's sled. Snow pits waited just a step from the broken trail. The storm got worse. Cody concentrated on Beth's smile, the memory of her standing alone in the compound watching him drive out. It was better than thinking of what lay ahead.

White flurries thickened. Uphill, through a deep stand of evergreen, the trace wavered. The runners bogged and had to be dug clear. The team kept pulling. Gray Arctic dawn glittered on the ice-capped cones of pine and blue spruce, and then the grove had dropped behind and the long rise before him was a blizzard-whipped desert, showing nothing but blurred hoof prints and the bobbing lines of Brando's course.

At the crest of the hill, hidden by a jutting ridge, Cody hauled in. His snapped order silenced the dogs. He lay belly-flat, unconscious of the cold gnaw of snow against his face. Westward, the land dropped white and dead to the frozen Chandindu shallows. He could see the sled, standing deserted on the flat and, just east of it, the sharp bluff crowned by jagged outcroppings.

He watched the calico pick its mincing way along the sled trail, the thick figure swaying man-like in the saddle. He frowned. His eyes swung to the eastern bluff. A shadow moved in the outcrop of boulders. Early daylight glinted on gun-metal. Cody's mouth twisted. "Geez, no!" Fire flashed and his cry was lost in the nasal whine of the slug and down on the flat the calico reared, its reins dragging. The rider straightened sharply, then sagged forward, clutching the pony's mane. The body slipped out of the saddle and lay in a snowbank near the sled, one mukluk still caught in the stirrup. The calico pawed snow, blowing shrilly.

The wind beat against silence. Cody lay without moving. On the east rise the shadow stirred again, stood erect and walked slowly downgrade, the Winchester held tight and ready. Cody got to his feet. Brando didn't notice anything but the dark, crumpled form by the sled. He bent warily, rolled it over. His curse carried loud on the whirling storm.

"You know, Dix, I wanted to believe that reformed sinner line."

Brando's back went rigid. Wind and confusion had blottted out the whisper of Cody's advance. Bravdo did not turn; he held his crouch, the rifle balanced on one knee. Large flakes came to rest and melted slowly on Morna's empty, upturned face. Cody spoke quietly now, close behind him and to the left.

"You though she was me. Wearing

men's clothes. Riding my calico. You figured I'd trail you, make sure you'd clear out. One bullet and business as usual. Bushwhack me and everything would be fi . . ."

Branco pivoted blindly, rolling back, bringing up the black barrel and firing. Cody tried to fall away to the right. It was no good. The yellow spike of fire burned along his temple and wild Northern Lights rocketed in the darkness of his brain. Things went out of focus. He pitched face-down in a smothering, ice-crusted drift.

He tried to see. Brando was only a fuzzed, quick-shifting shadow, a pair of boots and a gunmuzzle too near his head. Words seeped down through the staggering pinwheel of lights.

"Same old Glory-boy. Never learn, will you? Shoot, Glory-boy, then talk. I've changed that story a mite. Like to hear it? I tell the Mounties you know about Morna and the cache. You trailed her and she used a rifle; you got her but the shot stunned you. Twenty-below did the rest. A man dies easy at twenty-below, Glory-boy."

Cody shook his head. It didn't clear. His own voice sounded far away.

"It won't tie in, Brando. Too many loose strings."

The laugh ripped across the moaning storm.

"Only one string. The furs. Somebody might wonder why I didn't turn them in long ago. Somebody might find Jessup, ask questions. So, they find Jessup—dead. And they find the cache burned to the ground. See, Glory-boy? Morna did it when we got too close for comfort. Morna was a very nasty little girl . . ." The smile jelled. "All right. I lose the pelts. But, I'm still Factor of Chandindu. There's plenty more where they came from."

Cody made one knee, grabbing for Brando's boot. Brando stepped back. The ground came up hard. Cody swore thickly. Loose string, his mind said, Always a loose string, somebody knows too much, Beth, somebody that has to be shut up—for good . . .

Cody said, "You lousy sonofa . . ."

The hobnails sidestepped again and for a moment, over him, Cody saw the unbalanced grin, the slow brutal lift of the gunbutt. He started to roll away. The metal heel came down too fast.

HIS ARMS and legs wouldn't move. Somebody was pressing a white hot faggot against his temple. When he tried to talk his lips were numb and then tingling with the burn of whiskey on his tongue, running down his throat. He coughed. A knee and arm supported his shoulders. The glaring white flats reeled and righted themselves. The canteen-neck pressed his lips again.

Tantlak said, "Drink."

He drank. Beth's voice was close, murmuring softly, "You didn't come back. I was afraid. The Chief offered to help." Her fingers gently probed the scalp wound. Cody winced, then sat up abruptly.

"Brando!"

Beth shook her head. "He was gone when we got here."

"How long?"

"Half an hour." Her hands restrained him. "You have to rest. Your head . . ."

"Damn my head!"

He lurched to his feet and swayed, pain throbbing in the pit of his stomach. Beth was at his elbow. So was Tantlak. Cody took raw air deep in his lungs.

"All right," he said. "All right, now."

Waiting Crees had knotted nearer. Someone had covered Morna's body with skins and laid it in one of the sleds. Harnassed malemutes lay watching, their jowl hair silvered by frost. More steadily, Cody said, "He hit out for the cache. North to the Barrens. If he burns those pelts, there's no proof."

Tantlak nodded, his jaw firm, decided. "I have sleds. I have braves to fight beside you."

Cody looked at him, then grinned. "He can't be far ahead. Even if he did take the calico." He turned to the girl. "Beth, you oughtn't to . . ."

But her gaze was quiet, moving from him to Tantlak. "It's all of us, now, Cody. Together."

The Cree nodded again. Briefly, Cody's arm drew her close.

There was no more talk.

Cody took the lead sled. The storm did not let up and when they struck north

the wind was full against them. It cleared Cody's brain. The Indians moved quick and sure, hawing the dogs, tooling the other three sleds with sharp, skilled wrenches of the geepole. Beth didn't speak, but more than once her eyes reached out to Cody. He smiled reassurance. He didn't feel like smiling.

Stridng ahead, he used snowshoes to break bogging drifts for sled-passage. Short-lived Arctic daylight glared across the blurring wastes. The huskies floundered and had to be stopped for a breather. Once an outfit slurred close to a deep ice-chasm; a husky was pinned under the runners, its belly slit. The Crees didn't like the job, but nobody wasted time on words. They used a .30-.30 and cut the dead animal from the traces.

The sleds ground on, skirted the eastern rim of Chandindu Post. A few of the squaws stood by the grove, watching. The sled that carried Morna's body cut out, heading for the compound. The rest kept going.

The trail didn't get better. North of the Post, the Barrens sprawled, deceptively level, pocked with hidden pits. Through blinding snow the Crees drove forward. It was easier in the spruce grove. High, clashing branches flawed the wind; the teams hauled through dead-silent pockets. Cody had drawn a Winchester from the fur-lined boot strapped to the lead-sled. He made a sign. Indians hove back on poles, braking the dogs. Even before they came to the north lip of the stand, they could hear the bellow of the fire.

The steep cliff-grade was dotted with the calico's prints. Halfway up, a figure lay spreadeagled, black against the snow, a rifle flung clear of its clutching hand. Jessup had a broken, dead look.

At Cody's side, Beth stifled a low cry. He followed her stare. The Indians had seen it too. On the deep, jutting cliffledge, the cabin was a mass of frantic, licking flames. Black smoke billowed up against the bloodred glow of the sky. Freeze-rotten timbers were already groaning, sagging forward on the ledge, and ice-boulders slagged away, crashing down to shatter on the jagged rocks of the valley. But, more than the fire held their attention. They could see Brando outlined very clearly against its rising, roaring torch.

He stood straight, facing the grove, his legs wide set, the wind tearing at his clothes and hair. The Winchester was levelled for action. One of the Crees made a deep angry sound in his chest and stepped into the open. The Winchester arched up and flashed back splintered from one of the tree trunks just above the Indian's head. The Cree didn't go any farther. Another brave cranked his own rifle, drew bead. Softly, Cody said, "Hold your fire." The Indian obeyed. Cody started forward. Beth touched his sleeves; his hand covered hers. "It's all right," he said. He turned to face the cliff.

The heavy cabin roof was crumbling slowly, threatening to cave. A charred, loosened timber rolled free, thundered over the rim, dragging snow and dislodged rocks in its wake. On the ledge, Brando raised his gun. Cody's voice was clear and carrying.

"You're coming down, Brando."

The Winchester took aim. Breath caught in Beth's throat. She saw the yellow dart of fire and heard the bitter singing of the bullet. Cody's shoulder jolted, twisting him to one side. Snow whirled on the valley wind. Cody kept walking. His tone didn't change.

"You're coming down, Brando. You hear me?"

The cabin inferno belched black smoke; roof-joists sagged and jarred. Foundations shuddered.

"You haven't got a chance, Brando. When that roof goes, so does the ledge. Come down or be buried in an avalanche."

The rifle hammered again; a wave of snow billowed near Cody's foot. Then they heard a crazy sound. Laughter shied across the rising growl of the flames. High, hysterical laughter.

"Come and get me, Glory-boy! Didn't I tell you? Some people can grub in the valley. That was never for me! It was all the way, right from the start. Everything or nothing!" It lifted on a ragged scream. "Hear that, Morna? I told them we'd make it! Top of the mountain!"

The laughter was swallowed by the last rolling updraught of flames. Eaten timbers screeched and bellied, grinding forward.

The jutting ledge tore loose at one side and pitched crazily. Brando wheeled, making a try for solid ground. It didn't work. Beth screamed once. Huge, flaming logs lunged into space, dragging tons of loose icerocks and snow. Brando was directly under them. Nothing could have lived through it.

Slowly, the wild thunder rolled away across valley tundras. The snow-slide grumbled and settled in, white clouds drifting down like dust. A few small boulders teetered and came to rest. In the end, there was only the soughing of the wind.

Cody walked back to the grove. None of the Crees spoke. He put his good arm around Beth. She touched his shoulder and he winced, then smiled. "It's all right," he said. "Everything's all right, now." She came against him, holding close as if she would never let go.

After a time, the Indians moved. They talked, then, quickly, with a growing realization of hope in their eyes that turned to Cody. They wheeled the sleds and mushed the teams loudly. One of them laughed. It was a good sound.

Cody and Beth walked to the lead sled. Tantlak faced him, dark eyes questioning. "There will be a new leader at Chandindu."

Cody did not smile. His gaze turned to the cliff, slow and thoughtful.

"Once I told a chechako—power's a disease. It takes root and grows and eats inside. It can twist a man."

The Cree Chief shook his head. "Not all men."

Cody didn't answer.

He turned to the sled and tucked the fur rugs close about Beth. For a moment her fingers pressed his.

"Not all men," she said gently.

He smiled, then swung to the lead dog. The, "Haw!" of his voice was clear and strong. The sleds headed south. Nobody looked back.

The snow fell.

On the shattered crest of the cliff, black, beaten fragments of Brando's cache still smouldered. But the wilderness air was clean and good in the valley.

PAMPERING THE WHALE

Whaling in the strait between Alaska and Siberia is a rather prosaic business, in which the modern whaling gun is used even by the Eskimos. But as recently as forty years ago the natives invested their spring whaling operations with considerable secrecy and ceremony. About the last of April a long lead would open up in the ice off Pt. Hope, Alaska. Along this stretch of water the bowhead would make its way to the Arctic Ocean.

The men of the village would go out to the edge of the land-fast ice, poise their skin-covered umiaks above the water, ready to be launched at a moment's notice, and lay out their lances of slate or jade. Each man wore some mystic sign or image. Usually the oomalik (captain) owned the boat; and, since he usually had more wives than he knew what to do with, tradition authorized the harpooner (the most important man in the boat) to choose any one of them for his companion on the night before the hunt was to begin. For, the medicine man assured them, whales preferred to be killed by a man who had just left the bed of the lady of his choice!

USEFUL UMIAK

The Eskimo umiak is usually thirty feet long, and comes to a point at each end. The frame is made of driftwood; and the pieces are lashed together with walrus-hide thongs. The skins (walrus, bearded seal, or killiluak) are carefully stretched and double-stitched with sinew to make them absolutely water-tight.

This boat can be sailed, paddled, or towed. When Eskimos travel around the shore-line of a lake, or along a sandy beach, they hitch their dogs to a tow-line and sit back, while the dogs do the work.

An umiak will hold thirty people or a ton of freight. It is so light that it can be carried across an ice field by four men—or hauled on a sledge by a team of six dogs. It can bump into heavy ice without being stove in, as a wooden whale-boat surely would be; and it can be paddled through thin, newly-formed ice without having holes worn in the sheathing—something that cannot be done with a whale-boat. Sent, head-on, into an ice floe, the umiak will bounce back like a rubber ball. And if you do break a rib or punch a hole in the skin covering, they can be repaired as easily as you replace the rib in an umbrella or patch a pair of pants.

"Thinkin' of claim-jumpin', you little squirt," Katy, the giantess, barked at little Izzy. "Can't get my money one way so you're schemin' to get it another. Which claim you figure to jump this time, smarty-pants."

RAINBOW'S END

By JOHN M. POOLE

"YOU'RE A CHUMP, Dizzy Izzy, courting me. I can pick you up with one hand, you five foot nincompoop!" Katy's voice whirred like the turbine at Ballycop Falls.

"But, Katy dear, I'm crazy about you. You're so tall and forceful." Dizzy ran his slim little fingers delicately along her muscular arm. They sat watching the roaring blaze in the puddingstone fireplace of Katy's Golden Goose Saloon. It was one of those rare lulls in an evening's business when her pint-sized suitor could get a word in edgewise.

"Throw more pine needles on the fire," ordered Katy. "The place stinks of tobacco."

"You never minded the whiskey, did you Katy? You're what I need, a big lusty wife to take care of me!"

"I won't wash your diapers. Anyway, I'm a rawboned horse. When the stork brought me he forgot my hips; the lazy old bird threw in an extra set of muscles instead of going back after them. Sure, I didn't need 'em now; managed to make my pile without 'em, but that don't make me no Charmer."

She glanced at the cracked bar-mirror behind the counter to her right; the face that stared back at her from under coarse black hair was a healthy looking one and it still showed traces of youthful vigor, but it was oh, so homely! Those cheek-bones pushing through its tanned skinniness reminded her of those of an Indian squaw. The thin lips between the heavy set jaw and broad nose opened to speak, and Katy heard herself saying, "What you want is my money."

Dizzy's mouth sagged until it was higher than it was wide. "You're dead wrong, Katy." He appraised her with his snapping indigo eyes, beady little eyes like those of a turtle. "No, Katy, you don't understand; you attract me just the way you are."

This passion of his in size 11 shoes, with her broad shoulders and wiry body, was an Amazon. As she sat beside him on the split log bench before the fire, even Dizzy had to admit that the Graces had bypassed the lady proprietor of the Golden Goose.

But he loved her large mouth, the shrewd blue eyes under her shaggy brows, and her spirit of comradery. Her very size and might answered the deep longing of his soul. We so often mate by opposites.

"If I ever parked my six foot carcass on your lap, Dizzy, I'd crush that moaning mooncalf out of you. You're after money, and you won't get it. So stop your apple polishing and scat!"

"But, cross my heart, I love you, Katy." Dizzy's shrill voice screeched with the earnestness of his conviction, as he solemnly crossed his left breast. "Your money has nothing to do with it."

"Do you know, Dizzy, I wish I could take an oilcan to that throat of yours. Sometimes you get on my nerves."

Katy crossed her arms where her breasts should have been and faced him with distain. "All right, little lad, if you don't want money, then, show me the color of yours to prove it."

"But Katy, you know I'm broke!" wailed Dizzy, his sharp little features looking as if he wanted to cry. He pulled his pockets inside out to prove it.

"Sure, and broke you'll stay. A fine husband you'd make!" Katy stood up to wait on the customer who was pushing through the swinging doors. A whiff of crisp Spring air puffed in his wake.

"Hello, Jake. How's luck?" she inquired.

As Dizzy slipped out of the saloon, unsped by any cheery word of "Good-night," he glanced at the full moon in the sky. About it was a rainbow ring. He recalled that it was an important omen, but he couldn't remember whether it was for good or bad.

"Why has Lady Luck always overlooked me?" he wondered. "Perhaps I'm so tiny she can't see me." He may have been right, too. Life is hard on the frontier, when one is on the wrong side of five feet; even the unruly pompadour of curly hair that grew straight up from his scalp couldn't snitch enough height from Fate to put him in the five foot class that held all average men. The miners treated him like a puppy.

On the other hand, when Katy opened the Golden Goose, the golddust from the Ballycop mines came knocking at her door, begging to be melted into fiery hot liquor. She never refused to grubstake a miner after she had cleaned him out; instead she sent him out into the hills again, on shares. She had become co-owner of more than one rich mine.

KATRINKA had even grubstaked Dizzy on his first venture. He had returned, complaining sorrowfully that other men had cleaned him out. She didn't outfit him again, not because she didn't trust him, but because he was too small to be useful.

How it happened no one could guess, but Dizzy fell in love with Katy, that dark giantess, who, some hinted, bore the legal name, Gwendolyn. However, it would have been sissy to call Miss Katrinka Gordon that.

Katrinka couldn't believe her ears when he told her. It was positively ludicrous to have such a puppet for a lover. No wonder she put it down as his bid for a soft berth and easy money.

Katy's ultimatum left Dizzy no alternative but to make money, and the only way, in these mountains, was to find a gold mine. Katrinka had cornered other profitable business. With more resolve

than his neighbors along the Ballycop River would have expected, he laid his plans.

He'd have to win his pile against Katy's opposition. She was that kind. She'd test her man to the limit before she'd consider him. But that didn't phase Dizzy; like many small folk he had ample vanity as compensation.

There were miners all about the settlement; some were in town, some camped just beyond it. Not one of them would have grubstaked Dizzy knowingly; yet, there is something in human nature that yields to the importunity of a buzzing fly of a beggar, just to be rid of him.

Dizzy visited each miner's cabin with some trifling request, perhaps for a can of beans, or for a slice of bacon.

"Please may I have that worndown shovel?"

"You won't want that frying pan with the broken handle."

His victims fell to the attack. Dizzy found a complete grubstake when he catalogued his loot. And he had bartered no share of his enterprise to get it.

But no one had volunteered to give away a mule, so Dizzy would have to tote his own burdens; he'd have to prospect near home. This was much-tramped territory, prospected since early goldrush days. It'd be hard to hit the jackpot: that is, unless he contrived to beat the game.

Dizzy dropped in at the Mining Claims Registry Office, asking to see the books. Ike Martin, the grizzled old clerk, whose smile was usually warm with friendliness, gave him a hard look.

"Ye ain't thinking of claim jumpin', be yer Diz?"

Distaining to reply, Dizzy scrutinized the many entries. Among them were some rich and famous mines. Here was Katy's own *Poverty Alley,* the mine that had started her on her road to riches. *Shooting Star* had waved a golden fortune under the noses of three partners, intoxicating them with its heady wine of riches until they battled to the finish. Their final *Location Notice* was on a wooden headboard, large enough for three, in the hillside graveyard, back of town.

However, more than half the entries had never proved out. They were just the rush of timid prospectors to protect half explored mistakes. Coupling miner's gossip with failure to report each year's assessment work on the property, Dizzy proceeded to eliminate these claims. They were no good.

He was looking for that rare opportunity for profit where a prospector had discovered what looked like a good mine, had filed on it, leaving the description of his claim here in the record office—then had neglected to develop his claim to the extent required under the mining laws to hold it.

Sometimes unhappy things happen to miners; they get into fights, someone gets hurt, maybe killed. Men get run out of town, put in jail. Sometimes men just die. Maybe that leaves a rich mine up in the hills without an owner, or a newly filed claim without the exploration tunnel completed on it to show how rich it is.

Dizzy was hoping against hope for some such piece of luck. He might hit something good by refiling on a likely property. Other men had, although it was a dangerous practice. The former owners objected, when they returned to town or got out of jail, to having their property taken over by new management. It was all perfectly legal, however, and Dizzy felt virtuous.

The mining property held by Gwendolyn (Katrinka) Gordon, by assignment from Andrew Johnson, in payment of a whiskey debt, finally held his attention. Dizzy recalled old Andy. He had hung around the Golden Goose, a couple of years back. Katy had apparently accepted this undeveloped mine of his to settle up his bill at the time he left town. There might have been something to his mine; Andy had been an erratic sort of man; he would work himself sick out in the hills, finally come into town to recover. Then he would drink himself silly, get morbid, chuck whatever he had been up to, and start all over again.

The fact that a fellow like Andy hadn't returned to his mine didn't mean it wasn't any good. Also Katy hadn't troubled to take care of the assessment work. Uncle Sam requires a yearly effort to expand and improve a mine, to prove its owner's interest in it. Otherwise, a mining claim lapses, leaving the property open to re-

filing.

Old Ike went out while Dizzy was engrossed in his reading. He returned, bringing Katrinka with him. Her face flushed as she confronted Dizzy. He couldn't tell whether with excitement or anger.

"Thinking of claim jumpin', you little squirt? Can't get my money one way, so you're scheming to get it another. Which claim do you figure to jump, smarty-pants?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, my sweet. It's all fair and legal. If you want to keep your claims, seems' like you should keep them legal!"

"I don't know about that," retorted Katy. "Some of 'em ain't worth the expense of the yearly digging. I've got a lot of claims to hold. But if I catch you monkeying with any one of 'em I'll send a slug into the seat of your claim-hoppin' pants."

As Katy was a dead sure shot, this argument may even have borne more weight than the Law, in the vicinity of Ballycop, but Dizzy was a nervy little chap, given half a chance!

THE NIGHT was warmly humid in the light of the full moon. It was already late, about 3 A.M., when a man came, walking carefully, along Aspen Creek, a rippling little stream, tributary to the Ballycop, and leading up into the high ranges.

The sharply outlined moonshadows hid pitfalls beneath their blackness: ankle breaking holes left by rotted stumps along the streambank, toe-catching cross-trail creepers, deep narrow gullies cut by the recent Spring run-off.

The man cast a little shadow like that of a doll, a very dumpy doll, broader than he was long, who skipped along the trail with more liveliness than life.

Perhaps half a mile behind, strode a taller figure, restraining its customary rapid gait with difficulty. The tall one carried a rifle under her arm. It was Katrinka, stalking her little suitor.

Dizzy had left town shortly before dark to locate Katy's Johnson claim from its brief description in Ike's records. He thought he could find it easily because of its reference to Aspen Creek, particularly to the spot where it cut rapids through a narrow gorge between beetle-browed cliffs, the exact spot being marked by a slanting vein in the face of the cliff. It seemed impossible to miss.

He had shoved a couple of sandwiches into his pockets and concealed his rock-hammer in his shirt before sauntering out of town with such obvious casualness as to allay suspicion.

"Katy'll sure be furious if she catches on," he thought. But it didn't seem she had. He waited, concealed in the brush beside the trail, just beyond town, for a full half hour, to make certain that no one intended to follow him. Then he had zigzagged, double-tracked and looped, taking every precaution to conceal his intention of hiking up Aspen Creek.

Katy might have been fooled tonight, except that she had kept watch over the little one ever since she had caught him in the registry office.

Two minutes after Dizzy hit the trail, her informer rushed into the Golden Goose with the news. She might have sicked willing henchmen on the little rascal, but she did nothing of the sort. She would pursue him herself. She liked to fight her own battles.

A good tracker like Katy didn't need to rush after Dizzy. She gave him plenty of time to strike out where he was really going. She was careful not to approach too close, for once he found her on his trail, he would head for home without showing his hand.

Then Dizzy pulled his final trick. He dropped down from its aspen wooded banks to walk in the creekbed. Where the water flowed over a flat slab of rock, looking reddish beneath the swiftly flowing current, it was flanked by a thick grove of small quaking aspen trees, their leaves still green and small with the first rush of new growth. These trees filled the tight little vale between the rounding shaley walls of the canyon of the stream at this point.

Dizzy broke a small branch from the greenish white trunk of a tree overhanging the water. It snapped with a brittle sound. He left it swinging, still suspended by a slender thread of bark, from the trunk of the tree. This was his way of "drawing a red herring across the trail,"

as the saying goes. No tracker could help but see it.

He dropped his rock hammer and two sandwiches on a log on the streambank while he completed his deception. To accomplish this, he swung up into the branches. The slender trunk would never have carried a full weight Tarzan, but it held Dizzy readily enough.

He swung, monkey-fashion, from tree to tree across the little forest, for fifty feet or so, until he reached the shale cluttered hillside. As he went, every now and then, he'd drop a leaf or break a twig, just enough to disclose to a prying eye that someone had climbed through the trees. Finally, he dropped to the ground, among the rocks of the hillside, to leave an obvious trail up the slope.

This delaying action completed, he backtracked through the branches once again to Aspen Creek, where he picked up his hammer and his lunch and went on upstream. Anyone following his trail would have to stop to investigate this possible switch in direction, even if the tracker mistrusted it; that would absorb time and time was all he needed. But Dizzy did not give enough credit to the depths of Katy's perception.

If Katy had been tracking a man to an unknown destination, when she arrived at the rock-slab, she might have been fooled, but by now, she knew that Dizzy was heading toward her Johnson quartz claim. After all, he had to; there was no other place he could go from here. She chuckled at the thought of Dizzy disporting himself in the trees more like a chump than a chimp. "If he'd only had a tail," she concluded, "he might a made a respectable monkey!"

She tried to recall the details of the Johnson claim. She had visited it two years ago, just as she did all her mining ventures. There hadn't been much work done on that quartz vein; the only good thing she remembered of it was the beautiful sunset on the cliff face.

All that Dizzy would ever get out of the Johnson claim would be trouble, she thought. And his troubles would start this evening, if he insisted on going through with his plans. "Claim-hoppin's a mighty bad thing to encourage in these mountains," she decided as she fingered her rifle.

MEANWHILE DIZZY was toying with his rock hammer as he continued upstream. It had a long slender handle, light for carrying, and a very sharp point, curved to pick out rock. He wondered if he'd be picking out any rich ore samples tonight.

Presently he recognized the landmarks; flanking cliffs topping the foliage that embraced the little sparkling rapids, the whole a moonlit diamond gateway to the high mountain regions beyond.

But he was not to be waylaid by visions of mountain beauty. Swinging abruptly away from the stream, he ascended the western hill, a mass of broken slabs and shale at the base of the cliff to the left. The grade pulled at his lungs as he climbed straight uphill.

With five minutes vigorous effort, Dizzy topped the rise, arriving at the base of the cliff. He paused to ease his straining lungs.

Nature checked closely with the recorded description. Behind and below, roared the rapids of Aspen Creek. Across the stream rose the companion landmark cliff. The vertical wall of the cliff he stood beneath was marked by the slanting undercut vein. He had to be right, he thought.

Yet, he lingered, studying the twinkling thread of silver that rippled below him. He wanted to make certain that no one had pursued him up Aspen Creek. He saw no indication of movement in the moist little vale of the stream, the brush grew green and rank, making observation difficult.

But, finally satisfied, Dizzy turned to the cliff whose brow protruded above him, towering a distance of some three hundred feet. He advanced along its flank, examining its shadows at close hand.

The rock mass angled to the right, revealing a natural pathway up the undercut vein across the surface of the cliff. The bright unobstructed moonlight at this point gave it the effect of an etching in the rock.

The cutting winds of time had scraped this foothold into the granite sandwich of the crag, yet they had not overdone their labors. There was barely width for tiny Dizzy to claw his way along the slope on hands and knees.

By throwing his weight inward, away

from the precipice, and steadying himself at times by the rock that shelved out both above and below him for about eighteen inches of foothold, he crawled along the narrow slot in the vein, leading, sometimes gently, sometimes steeply, up the face of the cliff.

The perils of the ascent would have terrified most men, but Dizy had never been afraid of height. He kept good control over himself, not looking down to the depths of space below him, but up toward his goal, a fault plane in the cliff, where his gold would lie, if anywhere at all in this eerie spot.

He brought his hammer into use, testing the solidity of the weathered rock along the ledge. Presently his efforts brought him to the end of the slot, two hundred feet in the air, where the vertical fault plane in the granite cliff had abruptly sheered it off.

The fault at this point was about five feet wide and filled with an outcropping of white quartz. Below him, long before reaching the ground the fault pinched off into a mere crack in the granite. Prospecting from below might not have shown it.

Now that Dizzy thought about it, his ascent of this slot in the cliff, hardly more than a mere scratch on the face of Nature, was about as crazy as trying to climb a rainbow in the sky. The question now was, had he discovered the pot of gold at the end of it?

Even the surface of the quartz was hard. He hammered off as many of the small projecting lumps as he could. Several of the chips bounced over the face of the cliff as he hammered. His blows resounded with telltale sharpness in the night air.

HE WAS much too busy to notice Katy emerge from the creek bed to approach the rock face. Katy with her gun in her right hand. She passed beneath Dizzy's perch, stopping to examine the chips falling from his blows. She walked three hundred or so paces further along the cliff and toyed with the loose rocks there. Retracing her steps, she paused again in the shadows. Standing just south of the vein, and hidden in the darkness, she looked up and watched him intently. Finally she disappeared westward into the night.

Dizzy halted in his hammering to study the little pile of rock chips on the ledge. In all of them were large yellow particles of gold. He had found the hoped-for pot of gold at the end of his rainbow. He decided that he would christen his discovery the *Rainbow Road*.

"Won't folks be excited when I tell 'em about this," he thought in high glee. It was the biggest moment of his life, perched as he was two hundred feet up in the air, with what seemed like all the gold in the world right beside his elbow.

He took a folded sugar bag from his breast pocket and filled it with samples of the ore. These he stuffed back into his pocket. To think that Johnson, the old guzzler, had traded off a bonanza like this for the price of a few drinks!

Dizzy backed down the trail, rubbing his hammer handle across the ledge as he went to erase his tracks. He certainly didn't want anyone to discover his *Rainbow Road* at this point. Now he must get the location safely refiled on at Ike Martin's office.

Just beyond the point at which he had commenced to climb the vein, he was startled to find a three foot monument of loosely piled rocks. Then he recalled that, of course, Johnson had to build monuments on his claim. "I should have expected to find them!" he thought. Fortunately they were in good condition. "It'll save me spending the rest of the night building them." He had barely time to return to Ballycop Falls before Ike opened up.

He bent over the monument and found a tobacco can with a claim paper in it. "This is Johnson's work. Remember, he used to smoke that kind of tobacco too." He decided to add his own Notice of Location to it. After he had replaced the can in the monument he hightailed it for home.

When Ike Martin opened his office door at 8:10 that morning, the first citizen of the town to greet him was Dizzy Izzy Isadore. Dizzy swiftly accomplished his legal business, refiling the original Johnson notice, changing only name and date. Exact duplication seemed to tie up his ownership clearly to that known location. When he had finished, his new wealth seemed safe.

By noon every Ballycoptian had heard the news. Little Dizzy Izzy had refiled on the Johnson claim! And the ore samples from his land had proved to be the richest ever tested in the assay office. What was that high-fallutin' name Dizzy had rechristened the old Johnson claim? Oh, yes, the *Rainbow Road.*

Within the hour, every curious rider, who could borrow a horse, was on his way out to look over this old Johnson property. Meanwhile, Dizzy dropped into the Golden Goose to call on Katrinka and to press his courtship.

With the joy that only love can lend, he told of his discovery and, consequently, the fulfillment of her demand for success and wealth on his part. He again asked her to marry him.

"Let's wait a little longer, Dizzy, until we're sure."

"What do you mean, 'Sure'?" he demanded. The cocky little man of sudden wealth was surprised. "I could have a thousand women now," he told himself, "Yet Katy puts me off. Still those gals wouldn't be like her, though!" He decided to be magnanimous and wait a little longer for her to be reasonable.

Katrinka would give him no explanation. "Wait and see," was all she would say.

Late in the afternoon, the horsemen returned from their trip to the Johnson Mine. They had carefully followed the original description of the property, the one which Dizzy had refiled in his own name that morning. They stomped into the Golden Goose, nearly slamming the doors off their hinges, to confront little Dizzy.

"If you were only heavy enough to tighten a rope, we'd string you from Hangman's Tree," said the larger man, who acted as spokesman.

"What's the matter, boys," inquired supercilious Dizzy. He was remembering his wealth and tried hard not to quiver from mere force of habit.

"There's no gold on that Johnson claim that you swiped from Katy, here. Where'd you get that rich quartz you pretended came from there?" his tormenter demanded.

"And what's that to you, men? demanded Katy, coming around the end of her crude oak bar with the menacing air of a mastiff protecting her puppies. "You certainly don't own it in any case: that is, unless you had thought of jumping it today yourselves."

"That could-a' been, Mum," admitted the oldest among the men, apologetically. He had learned from experience to tell only the truth in the vicinity of the Golden Goose.

"Mebbe you didn't know already," went on Katy, "That old man Johnson faked that claim he gave me just to wheedle me out of a few drinks. There never was anything to it, and I knew it, only I felt sorry for the poor mutt."

The men were silent. They could practically hear the air escaping from Dizzy's punctured balloon. Katy turned to her bewildered little suitor, and laughed.

"As for you, little one," she commenced. "You didn't ever even set foot on the Johnson claim that you refiled on this morning."

"I can't believe it," insisted Dizzy. "The creek, the path, the cliff, the vein: everything matched Johnson's description. I was there. I know I was there!"

"Mind answering a question then, little one?"

"Of course I don't mind," snapped the possessor of uncertain wealth. He was trying to cover his confusion by a sign of irritation.

"When you arrived at the rapids on Aspen Creek, toward which shoulder of the gorge did you turn?"

"I turned left toward the West cliff"

"And you men," Katy turned to the restless group of disgruntled riders, lined up before her bar, "You just tell me, now, how you went, following Dizzy's copy of the old Johnson claim, just as he refiled it this morning."

"We went East," stated the older man. "Yeh, we went right," every man agreed. "That's the way the Notice in Ike's book said."

"Could it be that you have made a mistake, Mr. Isadore?" inquired Katrinka with mock politeness. "And you trying so hard last night to put something over on me!"

"Great guns, Katy," exclaimed the startled Dizzy, at last comprehending what he had done. "I discovered a fortune on once claim and filed on another. I don't

want that Johnson claim at all. Mine's on the west side."

"So at last you've figured it out," commented Katy. "The drinks are on the house boys." But Katy's invitation cost her nothing. Once Dizzy had let the cat out of the bag, everybody dashed out the door, after the little miner, in a race to be first at Ike's office window to file on a slice of the bonanza, so suddenly revealed to be without an owner.

A score of men had run out after Dizzy, men with longer legs. He arrived last of all at Ike's office winodw. As he stood last in line he thought what a fool he had been to make such a stupid botch of the biggest opportunity of his life.

"Of course you fellows know," Ike addressed the crowd, "that a man can't properly meet the Law until he has first posted his Notice of Location on the property itself, marking the boundaries of his claim with the proper monuments. Then is the time to make your entry at the Registry of Mining Claims."

He knitted his brows at the man attempting to scrawl out a notice at the office wicket. "I'm sorry, Abe, but you and everyone else will have to follow the rules. Courts wouldn't hold with tryin' to do things backwards like you jibberin' magpies are doing here. Might take a lifetime of investigating to determine who had the legal claim. Nobody'd benefit by that."

He put the squeaky official pen and its bottle of muddy ink under the counter to emphasize his stand in the matter. "Tell you what," his face brightened. "You fellows could always go out there and shoot it out!" He slammed down the window.

The goldrush was on. Although it was late in the day, every man who had been at Ike's office grabbed himself the first nag he came to and hightailed it out in a wild race to see who could get his monument up first on the real *Rainbow Road* claim. This time there wasn't much doubt but that they all would turn "west."

But poor little Dizzy was out of the running. He crumpled down on the wooden steps outside the claims office, overcome by his woes, and sobbed. He'd lost a fortune; he'd lost fame; he'd lost everything, but chiefly, he'd lost Katrinka. This was the deepest hurt of all. To make a perfect fool out of himself before the woman he loved. She'd never look at him again, probably wouldn't even let him in the Golden Goose!

Old Ike Martin stuck his head out the office door. "Quit braying and come in here. I have some news your long ears will be interested in. I didn't tell the crowd, thought the boys would like their fun, but there was an entry filed this mornin'. Party got me out of bed, she did. I was mad; said I wouldn't. Then, I admitted I would. She had a gun; she's kinda' nervous with her trigger finger. So that entry got in the books right early. Want to see it?"

"No," moaned Dizzy. Nothing seemed to matter now.

"Well, here it is, anyway." Ike lugged the great thick ledger out of the office, and slammed it down on Dizzy's knees. "Now read it!"

Thus bidden, Dizzy read. It was the correct description of a claim filed on his *Rainbow Road*. Somebody else had beaten him to it, not late this afternoon, but even early this morning. Somebody had gotten to the office from Aspen Creek before he did! It seemed incredible.

"Read the signature," prompted Ike.

Dizzy obediently read. He knew what was coming. Katy had beaten him to it, when he'd thought all along he was outsmarting her. He read "Gwendolyn (Katrinka) Gordon Isadore."

"She said, 'Twarn't no good until you ratified it,'" added Ike. "There's been a sheriff's possee sittin' on their fannies out there all day, guardin' that claim fer you two. Katy said 'There'll be trouble before sundown,' and made 'em go."

What is so right about this picture?

Is it that Dad's finally retired . . . the old alarm clock gagged for good?

Is it because now Mom won't have to watch him leave for the office any more, looking just a little bit tired?

Or is it because now Dad and Mom will be starting an especially happy time of life *together?*

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Shroud of Snow

By ANSON SLAUGHTER

The icy Arctic gives bountifully to those of honest heart; to those who cozen and defile it, it sets the elements against them. So proclaimed the aged gold-seeker, Wash Tetley . . . and his saga of John Cottrell and the man-killer Pass bore him out.

NOBODY BELIEVED him. And you couldn't rightly blame 'em. Men heard queer stories about Wash Tetley. Chechakos, fresh from the Outside, listened to the old ones talk through cutplug pipesmoke about weather that froze your breath on the air and sealskins worth a king's ransom; about snowbound cabins and ghostwolves and Pelly squaws with amber skin—and Wash Tetley.

Twenty years, man and boy, old Wash had combed white wastelands and sterile Arctic peaks for the yellow metal. In 'sixty-two, a whisper of gold was reported by Hudson's Bay Company men; Tetley found nothing but months of loneliness and dead malemutes and threatening hunger. Then, in 'seventy-one, a trek along the Rat to the headwaters of the Porcupine and suddenly molten sunlight glimmering in a creekbed. He was rich; he had money to burn and big stories to squander. But it was only skim-digging; the strike ran dry. Tetley got just enough out of it to stake him on another wild goose chase. That was when "Wash" became more than a nickname.

Back in Missourah, Mah and Pap used to call him Wash for short and down to the settlement schoolhouse mousey Miss Tolliver always spoke it out proud and proper-like — Master Washington Tetley. But, half a lifetime made a difference. Up here in North Country, when someone winked at the grizzled old buck by the bar and said, "Hi, Wash," he wasn't thinking of the father of his country. He was laughing at "Washout" Tetley, the cootiest goldbug North of 'Fifty-three.

And they laughed that night in Skagway; the mudchinked walls of Guthrie's Trading Post flung back the echo of their laughter and it ran along the bar and gurgled in the tap of the rumkeg. Big Matt set up a fresh one and shoved it at Wash.

"So you done it again, you old siwash? You struck it rich again . . ."

"It's real, Matt. This time it's the McCoy. A mother lode . . ."

The guffaws got louder. A barfly banged one foot on the brass rail, unable to quit giggling. Only the tall dark-faced man at the end of the bar did not laugh.

"Come off it," Big Matt said. "Rinse that blarney down with rotgut . . ."

Wash's grey eyes burned like hot ice. He said quietly: "It's no use talking to a bunch of jackasses that figure gold ought to hop into their pockets."

"This is 1886, Wash. The streams was milked dry long ago. Sure, Alaska can make a man rich. A fur man . . ."

They roared. The man at the end of the bar set down his glass. His voice was level. "Maybe Tetley's got something. Smart men would listen."

He had the hard look of a man who could tell a mule to move on and make the order stick. Eyes turned to him; the laughter dwindled.

"Smart?" Wash said. "Mister, you got these boys wrong. They want it all the easy way. No hard work; just spill water through a pan and fill your poke with dust." His laugh was flat, arid. "They can't understand. A man's got to know the land; he's got to coax her along, keep her warm. She's got things to give, but she don't give for nothing."

"Like a female," Big Matt said. "Just like a squaw, eh, Wash?"

It started all over again, the chuckles and roars in smoky stillness. The kerosene lamp swayed. Somebody said:

"You coax the land, Wash. I'll do my coaxing on the real thing. Something with

curves in the right places."

Tetley's grip on the whiskey jigger was taut. So were the words.

"I need a grubstake and a sidekick to help me mine the stuff." He looked at the dark-faced stranger. "There ought to be one manjack amongst you bright enough to get on the bandwagon. I'll split the take fifty-fifty. All we got to do is cross White Pass."

"Is that all?" somebody said sourly. "Why not just commit suicide with a gun. It's simpler."

The man at the end of the bar said, "White Pass is dangerous?"

"Dangerous?" Big Matt chuckled. "New to this country, ain't you, friend? Most folks knows about the Pass. It's a man killer. Ain't nobody loco enough to use that route to the Inside 'cept Injuns and eagles."

Wash downed his drink and stared at the empty glass.

"Men've crossed her. I crossed her myself. There'll be more like me. And the man killer'll be good to them. To the right one, she'll say, 'Go on, take what you want'. Only the wrong ones, she'll shut out. The land's got a feeling about right and wrong, good and bad."

"Mister Tetley and blushing bride, Alaska!"

It was a great joke. The laughter was raw in his ears and his neck felt hot. He didn't say anymore. He went to a table in a far corner and sat there, alone, and in a while, they forgot him and found something else to laugh at. The sound of their voices seemed far off. March wind washed in from the Bering Sea, buffeting flurries of snow against the oilskin cabin windows and Wash sat very still, listening to the soothing murmur of the land, close and friendly and without mockery. "We'll show them," he said aloud. "One of these bright mornings."

A tall shadow fell flat across the rough-hewn table. Hands set a mug and bottle in front of him. Wash looked up into the stranger's slow grin. He filled the glass and drank.

"Go on," he said thickly. "Heehaw with the rest of them jackasses."

The man from the bar sat down, stretched long legs and studied the blunt tips of his mukluks.

"Maybe they got reason to laugh. Don't seem like the discoverer of a rich lode would have to hustle a grubstake."

Wash refilled the glass; the smoke of rum had begun to haze his deep-set eyes.

"Let 'em laugh. They always laugh at men like Harper and McQueston and me . . . Mister, I could tell you . . . But, what's the use? You're like all the rest."

The stranger leaned forward. "I'm John Cottrell; I came to Alaska to prospect . . . I'm not laughing, Tetley. I'm listening."

Wash stopped drinking. His gaze held Cottrell's.

"I said before, Mister. Men don't rightly know this land. They figure her gold ought to be floating free in creek and river beds. Some of it was; but that was just a beginning. The real paydirt lies twenty foot down under drift from the glaciers; frozen at bedrock. I wasn't funning about keeping the land warm. I had to build fires to thaw her out. I had to dig for days. But, she's there. Hundreds of pounds, at eighteen hard dollars an ounce."

Cottrell's dark face was stiff. The eyes had gone bright and brittle. Wash finished off his drink.

"But, mining takes time. I ran out of grub. It was a long haul back to Skagway."

"This mine," Cottrell said. "Where is it? You made a map?"

Wash started to speak. He didn't. The creases tightened about his eyes.

"Maybe that's my business," he said.

It was like a slap in the teeth. Cottrell straightened very slowly. He stood looking down.

"I got a good packhorse and enough dinero to stake two men. You said the deal was fifty-fifty. If you don't trust me . . ." He shrugged, turning away.

"Hold your horses." Wash stared at his glass. "Don't get me wrong. I got to be sure, that's all. I nursed this country a long spell. Me and her, we're friends. I don't want nothing to change that; no wrong ones that'll make the Pass sore at me. If my partner's a wrong one, that man killer's going to stop us. I tell you, Cottrell, a country knows the ones that'll hurt her. One way or another, she keeps them out."

Cottrell sat down again; he refilled Wash's glass.

"But you and me, she'll let us through. We'll take this man killer in a breeze."

"Sure." Wash grinned through thickening whiskey mist. "In a breeze."

Cottrell's smile was cold and artificial.

Wash didn't notice.

EVERYTHING seemed fine. The horse was a chestnut with powerful withers and a friendly disposition. John Cottrell had money enough to buy the best and plenty of it. The men at Guthrie's Post had stopped laughing; Wash enjoyed the mixture of surprise and growing thought in their eyes. He pulled the packcinch tight around the pony's belly and looked at Cottrell. In the pallid mist of dawn, the dark face was calm and sure. Cottrell winked, hawing the animal on toward the marshes, and plodding alongside, silently, Wash whispered to the waking earth, This is it, baby; now, we'll show them. It was a long time before he realized the land wasn't answering.

A notionable wind, purged down from the blinding steep wall of the Pass, had turned suddenly icy. Gritty blasts of snow exploded in their faces. The marshes seemed thicker and mud clung heavy to their mukluks. And over everything lay a dead while silence broken only by the uneasy snuffing of the horse. Cottrell pushed forward steadily; he seemed not to notice the sudden grayness of the land. Wash shrugged off a shiver. Day-dreams, he thought. Why should the land turn against him? They were friends; they had lived together a mighty long time; they knew and trusted each-other. Still, the face of White Pass glared palely at their approach. The wind was too sharp and quiet. And, at noon, in the last treacherous reaches of the marsh, the horse caved in.

The leg wasn't broken, but the muscles were strained. Cottrell straightened from examining the animal.

"She's hauling too much. We'll have to back-pack some of the stuff."

He started to unhitch the rawhide thongs. Wash didn't move to help. He stood staring through silent whirling snow at the bleakness of the Pass.

"I don't like it," he said softly.

Cottrell looked at him. Wash shook his head.

"She looks bad, Mister. This here land's got her dander up about something. First the storm to make the going harder. Now, the horse. I tell you, she's got a mind to stop us."

The tall man laughed. "The pony'll be all right. And no storm's going to keep me from a fortune in dust."

"I know this country, Cottrell. I lived with her."

Cottrell faced him square; the smile was gone.

"It couldn't be that you're welshing, could it? It couldn't be that you're the lying coot they call you."

"Shut up."

"Maybe there ain't no mother lode. They'll like that when I tell them. They'll have a great big laugh."

Wash's mouth was a rigid line. A long minute passed. Finally, he said:

"We'll mush whenever you're ready."

Things didn't get better. Cottrell hauled half the load on thickset shoulders and the chestnut went on. But she was nervous, now; her eyes had bugged and the broad chest heaved too quickly. Her footwork was skittish and unsure. Slowly, the party moved through a tangled spruce grove to the foot of White Pass. Neither man talked. There was only the frozen snap of undergrowth and the wind playing sullenly at hide-and-seek. The pony whinneyed shrilly. The evergreens thinned and then, coming into blanched naked foothills, they began the climb.

Once, the trail that straggled up the mountainbelly had been covered with topsoil, but for years now, Indians had used White Pass as a portage. Quilled moccasins and unshod hooves had worn away the earth coating and now the searching foot found poor hold on jagged, slippery rock and shale. The path was narrow and steep; the chestnut shied back from the sheer lip. Cottrell swore, prodding her on.

Wash Tetley said nothing. His weathered face, squinted against rising stormwind, had a listening expression. He looked like a man who had asked a question and waited for an answer. The land rose bare and silent against a crepe-gray sky. The snowfall thickened. And the answer did not come. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe the anger of the man killer was a passing thing and the storm would let up. He told himself that. But he never believed it.

The answer came at nightfall. They struck camp in the lee of a trail-bend; wind worried the lean-to, but it kept out the snow. The horse kept shrilling at the cold darkness. Silently, Cottrell unhitched the pack. Wash bent over the sunken pit of dead kindling; the match scraped and he leaned forward, but he did not set it to the wood. A noise stopped him. Cottrell didn't speak. Tetley was very still. Before he turned, he knew what he would see. There had been a Winchester in a cinch-holster; they had brought it along for caribou. Only, right now, Cottrell had forgotten caribou. The muzzle was trained on the back of Wash's head.

TETLEY stood up slowly. Cottrell's face wasn't pretty; it was a rock face with eyes like mountain ice. He took a step forward and the frozen mouthline twitched. He didn't get the words out. Wash came in low and a knobby shoulder dug into Cottrell's gut. The veined fists cut deep. Cottrell cursed and twisted backward. He used the gunbarrel very neatly and when it came away the lived welt along the old man's cheek bone purpled and needlepoints of blood pressed through the torn flesh. Wash sank back against the rock wall. His voice was ragged.

"I knew she was right. You can't fool the land, Mister. Right from the start she had you tagged for a wrong one. I should've figured she was warning me."

Cottrell wasn't listening.

"All right," he said. "No more eye-wash. Back at the Post, I asked you a question. You almost answered, then you went cagey." The grin was crooked. "You got a map, Tetley. I want it."

Snow and wind chewed at the lean-to. The chestnut threw back its head and screamed and the sound went out over stony silence, dying a slow death. Wash shook his head.

"You're day-dreaming, Mister. There ain't no map. Leastways, not on paper." One bent finger tapped his forehead. "She's all right here."

The Winchester came up again. It didn't fall. Walsh smiled.

"That's it, friend. Always think before you bash a man's brains in. You can't kill me. You need me."

Cottrell didn't answer. He went to Tetley's pack; even when he moved, the gun didn't lose bead. Cottrell swore at the rawhide knots and then his free hand tore through the pile of patched shirts and drawers and cooking tins. He searched every pocket. He came back to Wash and said, "Stand up," through his teeth. His hands were rough. They found nothing. Tetley's smile stayed in place.

"Like I said. You need me—me and my map in my head."

Cottrell's mouth worked as if the words were hard to control.

"I can handle you when we get there."

"If we get there."

Maybe the gun wavered; maybe some of the stiff certainty went out of Cottrell's face. Quietly, Wash said:

"Use your head, son. You're risking your hide. This country don't like wrong ones. You could play it square, take your half and everything'd be fine. But if you steal and kill . . ."

"And if I did play it square; I guess you'd forgive and forget; I guess you wouldn't gun me now if you had a chance."

"I won't have to." Tetley stopped smiling. "The land'll take care of you. The man killer will kill, now. Like a woman, they said. Maybe they were right."

Their eyes met, then, and held, and he wanted to make Cottrell see how it was, to find the words that told about a man who lived with a country through forgotten springs and winters, and knew the secret whisper of the wind and life in young trees and the special smell of the land's dead wood burning in an autumn campfire, so that in the end the country was part of him, like his breathing or the wife he never married. The land was the Good Book and a loving woman put together and if you believed in her and loved back, if you gave something for what you took, she denied you nothing. But there were the wrong ones that came to take all and give nothing and the country knew them and hated, silently, and even if you wanted to warn them, they would not understand, because the love or anger of the land wasn't words or thoughts, but a feeling that no man could communicate.

"You started to say something," Cottrell said. "Finish."

Wind ripped down the mountain's face. Snow whirled, swiftly and without sound. The old voice was gentle.

"Not this way, boy. You can't walk in, without work, without love, cheating and murdering and tearing the dust from her. You can't use her and throw her away. She'll remember. She'll hit back. The Pass has got ways of levelling you. A man could die in these storms; he could take a wrong turn past the peak and head into bogs that swallow and smother; his foot could slip on rocks that look safe as Kingdomcome."

"Cut it."

"It's a long drop to them foothills. Break every bone in a man's . . ."

The words slurred under Cottrell's knuckles. The two men stood still.

"That's better," Cottrell said too softly. "You'll shut up, now. We move on at sunup. You'll lead me to that claim. And no more eyewash about land and man killers."

Wash didn't answer; he only stared, unblinking. Finally, Cottrell turned and went to his sleeping bag. He muttered, "Crazy eyewash!" again and tried a laugh. But it didn't quite come off. He lay huddled in his blankets, the stock of the Winchester under his fingers, and watched Tetley bed down. Dark mountain scrub rattled in the raking wind. A drift mounded over the unlit fire. Tetley slept. Once, in the night, a sound woke him. Across from him, Cottrell sat rigid, the rifle half-lifted to his armpit. His eyes searched the darkness beyond the bend in the Pass. But there was nothing. Only trackless white and the secret face of the summit brooding over them. Cottrell didn't look at the old man. He lay back and pretended to sleep again. It was a rotten piece of acting. His grip on the Winchester didn't relax for a second.

THE FIRE made things worse. Before dawn, Cottrell was working over frozen kindling. Wash leaned against the wall, watching. The snow-wind had turned temperamental. It worried a man and let him be and then came back to worry some more. It played hell with Cottrell's matches. The tall man swore and tried again. The lean-to canvas flapped. A sulphur tip sputtered and blackened, stillborn. Tetly laughed softly.

"I told you. One way or another the land fights back."

Cottrell fumbled with another match.

"Careful," Wash said. "In a storm like this, without fire, you're a dead man."

A minute passed. Deliberately Cottrell closed the matchbox. His hand shook.

"We'll eat the mush cold. Tonight we'll find a better camp. In the lee."

Wash didn't say no. He just smiled.

They had to use mauls; even then, the drift-choked gulches were hard to navigate. The horse shied and snorted its fear. Cottrell took to using a blacksnake; it only terrified the animal more. Wash didn't interfere. He studied Cottrell's dark face; the mask of certainty had gone crooked. A tic twitched under one eye, and dry lips moved as though Cottrell cursed voicelessly; cursed blinding sleet and smothering wind and, maybe, the echo of Tetley's warning. Easy, Wash thought; he's hooked, now; give him play and think, plan. Under his boots the earth muttered secrets. He listened.

Hope of a better camp was a daydream. They both knew it. The trail narrowed as it climbed and sheer wall pressed them too near the treacherous edge. There was no lee, only a shallow sterile clearing gnawed on all sides by the elements. The fire they managed was feeble. Without a word, they ate and turned in. Wash waited.

Cottrell lay on his side, facing the old man; his frost-stiffened parka shadowed the hard features. Maybe his eyes were closed. Maybe they were open and watching. His finger twitched on the rifle's triggerguard. After a time, gently, he snored. Tetley moved carefully. The scrap of paper was dirty and creased; the pencil stub worked by instinct in the dying firelight. Time and again, wary eyes flicked to Cottrell. Then, the work was finished. Wash folded the paper. Its crackle was like a gunshot in nighted stillness. Wash fumbled with the sheath of his canteen, thrusting the paper between it and the metal flask. The noise got louder. Cottrell gave a thick grunt and sat bolt upright.

"What was that?"

Wash had moved fast; but maybe not fast enough. Cottrell's gaze locked with his.

Tetley blinked sleepily. "What was

what?"

"A snapping sound like brush underfoot, or paper folded."

Wash looked away. He yawned and huddled down in his blanket.

"Maybe me. Just took a swig to warm me."

Cottrell's breathing was heavy and fast. "Maybe," he said. But he didn't believe it. Wash could tell by the tautness of his voice. And he could feel the questioning eyes that studied him for a long time that night.

By sunup the Pass was snowbound. Deep clots hid the treachery of the rocks. A man could miss footing and drop hundreds of feet. Cottrell stood at the lip of camp eyeing the white death-trap. Viciously, he broke a twig and flung it into the fire. Then, conscious of Wash's stare, his face went blank. He tried to sound calm.

"We'll stick here a couple days. The storm'll let up. Sun'll melt them drifts.

Tetley mopped up bean sauce with a crust of hardtack and drank the last of his coffee from a tin cup. He didn't look at Cottrell. He picked his teeth with a thumbnail. Softly, he said:

"The storm won't let up."

"How the hell do you know!" It broke harsh in Cottrell's throat.

For a long second, Tetley looked at him. A smile eased the lean grizzled face.

"The man killer's working, Mister. And she knows all the tricks. Stay here, and your grub and matches give out. You freeze or you starve." Wash shook his head. "Un-unh. You got to go on, no matter how dangerous she gets. The Pass's got you, Cottrell. She's laughing at you. Can't you hear?"

Wind screamed through the high desolate peaks, only it wasn't wind, it was laughter that came and went and came again, shrill and mocking. Sweat-beads glistened on Cottrell's upper lip. It wasn't because he was warm.

"You're crazy," he said hoarsely.

"You can say that. But you can't be sure. And this is just the start, friend. Now she's playing cat-and-mouse. But in the end comes the kill, slow and round about and painful—and too slick to sidestep."

The words made sharp, separate impacts, like slugs from a .45. Cottrell's mouth warped. He held the gun in a vice to still the trembling of his hand. After a time he got control of his voice.

"We'll keep moving," he said. "And we'll get through."

The two men stared at each other. The wind laughed.

TETLEY expected the accident. It was bound to happen. Nerves had screwed up every tendon in Cottrell's body. He had to take it out on something. The horse couldn't fight back. Its strained leg had grown steadily weaker. Now, fear never left the bulging black eyes. It screeched and floundered at the smallest barrier. The thin trail rose steeper with every yard. It would have taken patience to get the animal around the last bend that led to the summit. Cottrell wasn't the man for the job.

The chestnut shied and bleated and Cottrell said, "You stubborn—!" and laid the blacksnake across her gleaming flank. The whip was a whitehot iron against the muscles of the strained leg. The horse reared, lurching sidewise, and under its hind hooves snow slagged away. Cottrell lost grip on the reins; blindly, forelegs flailed the air. The pony slithered toward the edge as Wash dove forward; his fingers hooked in the canteen strap, hitched to the animal's bellycinch. The thongs went taut with dead weight; the horse's cry sounded too human. Tetley would have gone over with her if the canteen thong hadn't snapped. He stumbled back and one leg buckled under him and then slowly, very slowly, the scream of the beast died. Cottrell stared down at the broken carcass and the pack still strapped on its back.

"Fool," he said to the dead horse. "Stupid fool."

Wash sat propped against the naked wall. He touched his ankle carefully. Cottell looked at him.

"Get up."

Maybe he could have. He didn't. He said:

"I won't go far with this leg."

Cottrell's eyes narrowed; the tic in his cheek jumped. Tetley smiled.

"Piling up on you, ain't it, friend? First the storm, then the pony gone with half the grub and supplies. Now a cripple on your hands."

OUT OF BOUNDS

Fridtjof Nansen, the famous Arctic explorer, reported having seen a walrus on the ice in Lat. 79° 35' N., and Long. 134° 30' E., approximately 725 miles from the North Pole and 260 miles from the nearest land. Since the Arctic Ocean is more than two miles deep at that point; and the chief food of the walrus is clams, which they dig with their tusks from comparatively shallow water, it can only be assumed that the ungainly beast was hemmed in by a series of pressure ridges while he slept on an ice floe; that he was unable thereafter to reach the edge of the ice field and throw himself into the water; and was being carried on the ice across the top of the world.

BASKET WEAVERS

When the western Aleutians were overrun by the Japanese early in World War II, Attu was the first island to be captured. Previously the Attu natives had woven the most beautiful baskets in the entire Territory. They were fortunate in having a type of grass on the island better adapted for basket making than the grass that grows farther eastward along the "chain." And in and out among the very fine straw they wove strands of richly-colored silk.

The largest and most ornate basket ever woven by these Aleuts was made especially for Miss Helen Gould more than forty years ago to show their appreciation of her generosity in sending food when they were badly in need of it. Some of the most expert weavers on the island worked months in making this museum piece.

The tall man didn't say anything. He still held the Winchester. Wash's voice stayed cool, careful.

"You're in a sweet spot. You can't stick here. Grub'd run out; the freeze'd get you. You can't backtrack to Skagway with me alive and kicking. I know too much."

Cottrell came a step nearer. The rifle lifted.

"And you can't kill me and go on alone. Remember? No map."

The breech clicked open. Deliberately, Cottrell loaded the chambers and snapped it shut. The wall felt hard and cold cutting into Tetley's spine. You done it, he told himself. You overplayed it. The gun-muzzle was close. Cottrell said quietly:

"You're wrong. I can go on from here. Alone." The grin was too stiff. "Funny thing happened when the horse went over. You almost got killed, trying to save that canteen."

The snow fell soundlessly. Momentarily the wind had stilled.

Wash said: "Maybe I got a soft spot for rum."

"That's good, Pop. You're a real comedian. I'll take the map, now."

Wash sat still. His fist held tight to the canteen strap.

"I keep telling you. There ain't no map."

The rifle nudged his chest. He could hear Cottrell breahing.

"I'm tired of games, Tetley. No man trusts a gold location to memory. You was writing on paper last night. You ain't the diary-keeping kind. You hid the paper. A man don't risk his skin to save a swig of rotgut. But a map."

They both moved at onec. Cottrell's fingers closed on the canteen and Wash rolled to one side, yanking the thong. He didn't see the knee coming. It caught him in the chest and slammed him back against jagged stone and wind pushed out through his gaping mouth. He let go of the canteen strap. Cottrell backed away three steps without lowering the rifle. His free hand worked on the flask. Sweat stood out under his eyes as he tore at the covering and then the canteen fell, the whiskey bubbling hot and russet on the snow, and Cottrell didn't notice because he had the map.

It was old paper and soiled with smeared pencil lines. A dotted line crawled up White Pass to the summit and, just beyond, turned west and north across flat wastes to a creek marked with a circled cross. The laugh was low in Cottrell's chest. His eyes had got too bright.

"X marks the spot, eh, Pop?"

Tetley kept quiet. He didn't like the finger that itched on the Winchester's trigger, and the way Cottrell came toward him, slow and ramrod-stiff. He waited for the upswing of the muzzle, the dark eye that stared incuriously an instant and then the burning blindness of the shot . . . It didn't come. Above him, Cottrell's voice was edged.

"So the land's against me. Don't look that way now, does it? It was your lady-friend gave me this hunk of paper. If the horse hadn't slipped, I wouldn't have guessed where it was hid."

CARIBOU CROWD

Caribou occur in large bands that range over Arctic Canada and much of northern Alaska. Both males and females grow horns, which they shed once a year during the late winter; new antlers begin to grow early in the spring. During their summer and fall migrations the caribou congregate in such numbers that a hundred thousand may be seen in a single day from a given point.

Wash's gaze stayed on the gun. A note of gentleness that was almost pity touched the words.

"I'm warning you, son. So far, she's toyed with you. Go on with this and it'll be the end. The man-killer's tricky; she coaxes you on till it's too late to turn back. You can't do it. If you gun me . . ."

One eyebrow twitched upward.

"Ain't I told you? I give up the notion of using a gun. It's too crude. No. This land of yours'll do the job for me. A man can't travel on a bad leg; and he can't live without food and matches. I keep going. You . . . You wait. Men say you get sleepy after a spell. The freeze creeps up. Someday, maybe, they'll find you. See how it works, Pop? Nice and clean; no dirt on my hands. Just an old coot and his loving land that killed him."

Wash didn't blink. He should be smart, now. He should shut up. Only he had to make one more try.

"You can't fool her, Cottrell. You're the wrong one; and you're the one she'll get. Don't be a jackass, chechako. Play it straight while you're still breathing. If you follow that map . . ."

THE SLAP was hard; it left pale finger-stripes on Tetley's face. Cottrell kept smiling as he hefted the pack to his shoulders, and moved off along the trail to the gray trough that cut west beyond the mountain's peak. Once he stopped and looked back. The smile was still in place. It wasn't nice to see.

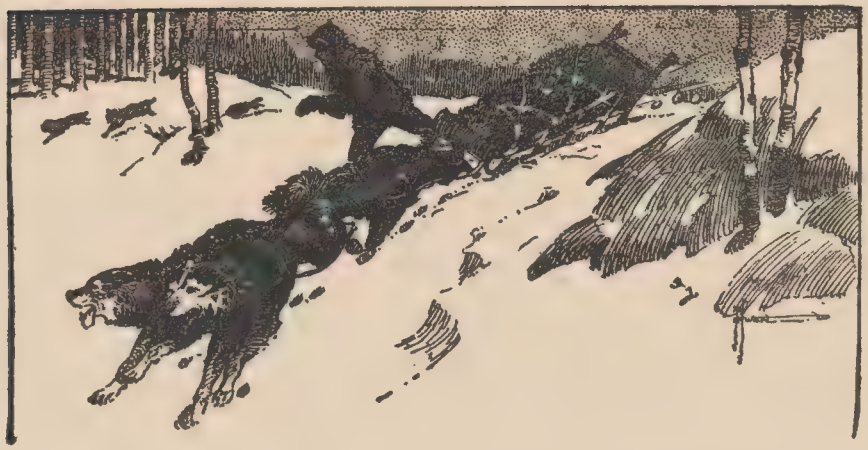
Tetley sat without moving and in the narrow canyon of the Pass a fresh wind rose, wild and echoing; sleet ripped in from the north, and under the storm there was this sudden suspension of sound, so that it seemed as if the land paused and waited like a cat and, finally, the cry came. It lifted above the wind and richocheted against glistening rocks; then, quickly, it was shut off, and Tetley knew the bogs had won. The bottomless mudpits that looked like solid footing until a man's weight broke the frozen crust; until the earth sucked him down, swallowing and smothering . . .

The old man didn't smile. In the stillness his lips moved. Maybe it was a prayer he whispered, or maybe he spoke, then, to the land, and the wind softened and he knew the land understood. She knew how a man had to help sometimes; how he had to nag and taunt until nerves were raw and the wrong one had nothing left but suspicion and gold-fever and was ripe to fall for tricks like a game leg and a false map that led through the summit of White Pass and west—and the bogs. You could try to stop a man; you could want to make him see the wrongness in him. But in the end he did the choosing. The battle was between him and the land that hated him.

The backtrail wasn't easy. Wash moved slowly; though he could use the leg, miles of downgrade slippery rocks didn't help strained muscles. He fell and crusted ice cut his hands; hunger weakened him. But the storm had slowed and died in the mountains and the March wind at his back had gentled with coming Spring. When he made Skagway he wasn't pretty to look at. But he was alive.

Big Matt and the boys at Guthrie's Post listened to the story of John Cottrell. They watched the circuit doctor bandage Wash's swollen ankle and the thought of the man killer was in their eyes. And they didn't laugh.

But they still kidded Wash Tetley about his gold-claim. In the early Summer they saw him head North to White Pass again and maybe some among them felt the green promise of the land that rolled out under his feet, but nobody really believed that the land that killed could love and give. It was nearly a year before they learned how right he was about his strike on Fortymile.



GHOST RIVER

By TOM O'NEILL

Eerie, echoing laughter haunted Pehay's Chippewayans. Fear-huddled in their huts they slowly starved, until Carnes of the Mounted mushed a ghost patrol bent on blasting that dread river phantom.

WHOO-OO! Ou-oo-o! Ee-o! Out in the northern night a bellow of maniac hooting boomed through the dense blackness of the spruce woods, echoing along the forlorn shores of Powistic River.

The weird cry rang out again and again. At it the four-footed prowlers stalking each other through the forest's matted jungles halted momentarily. Eyes gleamed in the murk. Ears flickered back to that sound whose note carried menace in its tones for all the dwellers of the Barren Lands.

Whoo-oo! Ou-oo-o! Over and over.

The cry floated down to a score of teepees close to a lopsided cabin that sat clear of the timber, and beside the River's glimmering waters. Under the new moon's rays the native dwellings stood out as whitish-brown blurs against the forest's gloom.

But now the hunting lodges were deserted and all Pehay's Chippewayans crowded the cabin. They huddled together on the earthen floor, whites of eyes in fear, every ear attuned to the approaching marauder.

"Oh Pehay, Great One, dost thou hear anything?" A woman's low voice whined in the gloom. At it the eyes rolled again.

There was no answer. Some of the children crept closer to the women. There was an uneasy stirring among the half-starved huskies tied up in a corner.

Again the squaw began her query, "Oh, Pehay, Great—" The rest of the sentence trailed off into nothingness. A soundless shiver ran through the natives.

Once more that jeering laughter from the woods came distinct and clear on the night air. It was something akin to the snow-owl's hooting or the grunting of a startled grizzly, but possessing a strangely terrifying note, hard to fathom.

The Chippewayans squatted in fearful, expectant silence. Again the cry came from the forest; closer now!

Still the Indians waited; petrified mounds of shadow in the cabin's funereal blackness. In a moment, their death-like patience was rewarded . . . A scratching came

from outside the log walls, faint at first but rising in volume.

Yip-yip-yip!

A dog yelped suddenly when the heavy bear smell was wafted in through the unchinked walls. One of the braves leaped to his feet and the huskie was knocked senseless with a club's blow.

The scratching continued, but from farther along the wall now. It was as if the Spirit Bear were seeking some weak spot through which it might force an entrance.

All at once the roughly hewn boards of the barricaded door gave slightly at the bottom. A fog of white breath billowed through the jagged cracks; puff, puff, puff!

Still the tensed natives waited; the women and children with old rags about their heads, the men holding hands over their ears without shame.

"*Ayeah! Ayeah!* Now we die!" came in a whispered chorus from the old squaws. They knew the signal.

In time to shuffling and grunting as the bear made its way along the wall outside, every eye was turned to the cabin's end wall. There one of the logs had been partially chopped out to form the frame of a rough window or ventilator. Now the scratching came from directly underneath this aperture.

A soundless shiver ran through the huddled natives. Their bulging eyes saw two stubby ears being slowly elevated above the bottom of the log. Then followed a huge bear's head, every hair brought into vision by the moonlight. The little pig eyes swept the cabin's murk. The head turned slowly from side to side. One ear twitched and flattened. The great cavern of a mouth opened wide and then again the beast's laugh rang out, filling the packed dwelling with its horrid note.

Scratching claws sounded on the logs' rough bark again. Then an aching silence.

IT was broken by a woman's scream. Bedlam followed. The dogs howled in unison, as the squaws vented shriek after shriek. The men beat themselves on the chest, pounded on the log walls with their fists. They had to react or go mad, now that the night's ordeal was over.

"Behold, I am very brave! I, Tanissi, will see this thing," a shout came from one of the younger men. Hands clutched at him in the dark but the boy evaded the fingers. He reached the wall and clambered up, moccasined toes wedged in the log crevices.

Tanissi peered through the aperture, fastening his gaze on the short stretch of white sand that lay between the cabin and a high rock ridge to the east.

The Spirit Bear was in full sight of the watcher. With great head swinging it ambled in the direction of the ridge. Suddenly the thing stopped and swung about. After several unsuccessful attempts the brute finally elevated itself upright on the hind legs, forepaws held out straight in front. Then it swung from side to side, head swaying back and forth, as if performing some bestial dance.

Whoo-oo! Ow-oo-o!

Again the brute's unholy laughter filled the open spaces under the spruce woods' gloom. Tanissi could stand no more. His fingers suddenly relaxed and he fell in a sodden heap on the hard-packed earth floor.

Water thrown on the boy's face and rough hands shaking him finally brought the Indian out of his swoon. He visioned the crowding face blurs and suddenly became conscious of Pehay's croaking voice, droning endlessly.

"Let it be thus," the Chief mumbled. "Because of the Spirit Bear we cannot hunt, being greatly afraid. We have eaten many dogs and now there are but few remaining for the pots. *Ayeah,* it is bad. But one thing can be done. Word must be carried to those very strong men, the Red Coats. Then they will come in fast canoes. They will kill this Spirt Bear and we will live in peace. There are brave men and cunning hunters in the teepees. Who goes to carry word to the Red Coats?"

Pehay finished in a silence broken by soft moccasin shuffling as the men faded away from the Chief. Go for the Red Coats? Brave the Spirit Bear and the terrors of the unknown? *Namoya! Namoya!*

IN a moment the old man stood by himself in the center of the hut, staring about him in mute bewilderment. Voices hissed together as the Chief slowly turned. Before he had time to speak again three

men stepped out of the gloom.

"Let is be thus," one of the braves clucked in Cree. "Behold here is this Tanissi. Always the boy talks with a big mouth, making a play that he is one of great courage. Let him go for the Red Coats! He is but a youth, not having taken a squaw. Therefore if the Spirit Bear devours him there will be none to weep. This is a strong and good talk. I have spoken."

All at once the hut broke out again into a babel of sounds. The shrill voices of the squaws were drowned out by a concerted boom of assent that came from the men.

Tanissi howled his terror, but little notice was taken of it. A sacrifice had been found. A few minutes later the boy was thrust through the door, shivering with fright. The Indian came to his feet, clutching a bag of pemmican in one hand, a canoe paddle in the other. His bulging eyes went to the white sand that swept almost to the cabin door.

There the Spirit Bear's tracks showed distinctly. Huge paw marks tipped with indentations made by the claws, and little wriggling lines where the long fur on the beast's feet had dragged along.

The boy's eyes went to the serrated line of cliffs to the east, where the bear disappeared each night after his visitation. Sudden fear gripped Tanissi. With a shrill yelp he bounded down the short beach, threw himself into a little birchbark canoe, and drove the craft out into the gleaming water with desperate strokes.

From the woods' shelter two figures—a white man and a half-breed—watched the boy's frantic paddle gathering the moonbeams as the dripping blade flashed and dipped.

Vance, the trapper, lowered his Winchester and laughed. "Gone for the noble Red Coats, eh? Well, let him. I have it in for that guy Carnes. Up here is a good place to settle it, too. Let him bring the darned Mounties. Suits me."

He patted his rifle's black shape, and the 'breed joined dutifully in his chuckle.

SERGEANT RICHARD CARNES picked up a stick of firewood from the pile by the cookstove, and fired it with unerring aim into Constable Andrew Burke's bunk.

"If you had to chop that stuff you wouldn't be so damn' liberal with it, young fella," the smitten man grumbled as he came upright.

The constable yawned, running freckled hands through his thick hair as he went on, "Here I'm improvin' my mind trying to figure out a new way to cook fish so's you won't know it's fish, and you—"

"Listen, Andy!" The sergeant halted him, swinging about from the paper littered table. He held up a brown hand for silence, gray eyes on the doorway, the crisscross weather lines on his tanned face puckered up into little ridges of annoyance.

"Another dog fight," Carnes grumbled, as again the distant yelping came to his ears. "That's old Sokki piling onto the pups. Go down and knock the stuffing out of him. I want to finish this cursed report."

"Some life," Burke grunted as his moccasins thudded to the floor, "Wish I'd joined the air service 'stead of the Mounted Police. Nothin' to do up there but turn a handle an' sail around graceful like. Oh well, I suppose I'll be a sergeant some day myself and then I'll pile it onto the unfortunate bucks too."

The constable jerked a dog-whip off the wall, and in a moment his thick-set frame filled the doorway. He stepped out into the North's eye-stabbing sunshine and padded off toward the yowling that floated up from the beach below the Athabasca's rocks.

The whitewashed walls and red roofs of the Mounted Police post stood out in startling contrast to the blue-black of the spruce woods sweeping down to the shore. The shimmering lake stretched endlessly to the blue hills beyond the horizon. Swallows skimmed along the cliff face, and far out on the lake the inland gulls circled and shrilled.

But the constable saw none of these things. His gaze was fixed on the yelping pack that raced up and down the beach, bushy tails flagging, wolf jaws snarling defiance at a little birchbark canoe halted in indecision, just out of range.

"Indian," Andy said to himself. "Got a danged good mind to let the dogs chew you up too. Bearin' tidings of great sorrow if I know anything. Quit throwin'

kisses at me, you yabbering ape," he growled in reply to a flourished arm.

"Here you! Sokki, Nistam, Otak! Cut it out now! Lie down, you weinie hounds!" Burke roared at the leaping dogs.

The long whip thong crackled, answering yelps came from the huskies and in a few minutes the animals were sitting in a row atop the cliff, pointed ears pricked, venting yapping protests.

The boy paddled to shore, got out, and pulled his birchbark up on the beach. He waved a tattered deerskin arm at the constable saying in Cree, "Behold, I am Tanissi, of the People of the River. I am a brave man and very strong. I come bearing a message—"

"You got a strong smell anyhow," Burke broke in. "Tell your bedtime story to the chief. I'm only a buck; not supposed to have any brains. Come on; dogs won't touch you. They're particular as billy-be-damned."

"Here's young Christopher Columbus with a hot story for the front page." Burke roared, thrusting the boy into the cabin.

CARNES laid a sheaf of papers back on the table and got to his feet. He towered over the Indian boy as Tanissi's darting eyes roved from the big man's moccasins to his yellow-striped riding breeches; then to the trig khaki shirt and the appraising eyes under the close-cropped brown hair.

"Whew!" the sergeant breathed when the youngster's torrent of speech finally halted. "What the devil do you make of that, Andy? A laughing bear that rambles about, scaring the Indians out of their wits!"

"They've been making home-brew out of raisins, if you ask me," the constable replied. "I've seen pink kangaroos and green ostriches doing the Black Bottom in my time, but these boys sure have a new brand of parlor tricks. Better tell him to go home and tell the tribe to try prune wine for a change; not so much kick to it."

"No. There's something behind this foolishness," Carnes said, thin lips set. "From what this kid says the tribe is just about all in from starvation. Been huddled up in that cabin for over a month. Curse these Indians anyhow; they're nothing but a bunch of children. We'll go up."

Burke groaned and walked over to his bunk, collecting his camp clothing. He well knew what was coming. And it did.

"We'll get one of the Indians at Kapow's camp to come down and look after the dogs," Carnes told the other man, as he slipped into his revolver belt. "This will be about two weeks' hike. Pack the stuff down to the canoe while I straighten things up and give this boy something to eat."

An hour later the three were paddling north in the police canoe. Penned up in the dog pound, the huskies rent the air with their lamentations. But the sound was soon lost and the little craft was speeding over the glinting water alone but for the wheeling gulls and piping swallows.

THREE days later the canoe was portaged over the height of land. It dropped down the swiftly flowing Snowbird and shot out onto the smoother waters of Powisitic River.

"Behold, soon we come to the Strong Woods. *Mewassin.* The smell of the deer country is in my nostrils." Tanissi clucked in Cree, pointing with his paddle.

"Hope you're right, noble redman," Burke grunted. "My back's nearly bust with driving this danged canoe all over the map. If there ain't no circus when we arrives look out for—Holy cats!"

The constable suddenly halted his speech, jerking a thick finger ahead to where the brown blur of a canoe was shooting along under the shadows cast by the branching spruce woods.

Carnes had seen the craft too, and had stopped paddling, staring from under eye-shaded hands. "White men, Andy!" he rumbled at length. "Going the same way we are and licking right along. Now I'd like to know who those hombres are, and what they're doing so far north."

Tanissi could not understand the words, but the accent he knew. The boy plucked urgently at the sergeant's sleeve, clucking, "That strong man Vance and the half-brother Tarneau. All the time they trap in the Land of Little Sticks, taking many fox. Behold, they are very—"

"You hear that, Andy?" the sergeant

queried, frowning. "Guess the boy knows what he's talking about. Vance and that Saskatchewan half-breed. Two bad actors, trapping in an Indian hunting preserve, too. Sink that paddle now!"

Burke waited for no more. His great shoulders heaved as the yellow blade bit the water and in a moment the police canoe was leaping toward the other craft.

Glancing up, Carnes saw white water spurting from the trappers' paddles. He sensed that they had increased their pace, and had no intention of being questioned.

No sounds now but panting breaths, the creak of knees on the canoe's bottom, and the steady *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* of the paddles. The police vessel drove through the water like a thing alive but another quick glance told Carnes they were gaining nothing.

ALL at once the sergeant stopped paddling, cupped hands to mouth and sent a ringing call. It came back in booming reverberations from the cliffs above the spruce woods, was echoed by the winging gulls.

But the two men in the fleeing canoe took no notice. They were lifting their craft with long, tireless strokes; bending every effort to get away.

"Stop the canoe—line down, and hold your breath!" the sergeant ordered. His gray eyes were blazing when he jerked the long-barreled Colt's out of its holster and threw himself flat in the craft.

Waiting calmly until his own short breathing had returned to normal and the canoe was motionless, Carnes held the weapon on the canoe's rim, sighted carefully and fired.

Cr-ack! A little spurt of white water leaped up ahead of the other vessel.

"Rotten shot!" Burke grunted. "I could hit that canoe with a beer bottle from here. They'll be around that point in a minute. Go on, Dick; let 'em have—"

Cr-ack! In time to the revolver's report a cry of surprise welled out across the water. The man in the bow of the trapper's vessel was staring stupidly at his paddle. The bullet had severed the slender shaft!

"Cripes! What a fluke!" Andy laughed. "But it did the work . . . Hot dog! Here we go," the constable called when he heard Carnes' blade slash into the water again.

The trappers made no move to get away now. They sat motionless in the little vessel while the two Mounties paddled leisurely across the lake.

"What's the idea?" Carnes threw out, when the two canoes were bobbing side by side. He addressed Vance; beetle-browed and sullen, sitting crouched forward, with a dirty mackinaw shirt slouching back over his great shoulders.

"I'll show you what the idea is!" the other man threatened, thrusting out his stubbled face, eyes gleaming. "I ain't done nothin' an' you can't arrest me for travelin' around on a pleasure trip, can you?"

"Correct," the sergeant admitted cheerfully, but his voice was cold. "I can't. But what I will do is arrest you for trapping within the confines of the Athabasca Indian hunting preserve!"

"Hear that?" Vance turned to the half-breed, waving a thick arm in disgust. "Says we're trappin' in the reserve, but he don't see no traps, does he? Humorous guy, eh, Tarneau?"

"Go ahead," Vance challenged, swinging back again. "You see two guys doin' the tourist act on Powistic an' you arrests them for trappin'. Go ahead, ole-timer. You'll have a fine record at headquarters by the time I'm finished with you."

"Go through them, Andy!" the sergeant ordered, ignoring Vance's tone. He was watching the big man's hand crawl down to the black muzzle of the Winchester lying against the canoe strut, when Burke reached over.

"Don't!" A single word that leaped out in time to the Colt's. Vance slumped back again, a half grin on his thick lips. Two rifles clattered aboard the police canoe and Burke sat up again, daintily dusting his hands.

"All right," the sergeant said to the trapper. "I'll allow you to make camp here for the night, but you'll turn back for Fond du Lac in the morning. Get that?"

"Say, you're generous," Vance sneered. "When I'm done with you you'll wish you'd left an innocent guy alone. Go on, Tarneau; get away from these crazy ginks before I goes sick at me stomach."

The half-breed dipped his paddle in reply to the order.

Once out of earshot Vance laughed

again, rumbling at the other man. "That's puttin' it over, eh? Thought them guns we pinched from Pehay's lodges was ours. Didn't know we was out there layin' for them to grab us. Too late for them to do anythin' tonight, Tarneau. We'll pull our stuff an' lay low 'till they beats it. A week of hangin' around here will sicken them bozos. Go on; paddle."

Burke watched the moving canoe with rebellious eyes querying, "Why the blazes didn't you arrest them and have done with it?"

"Because I have no direct evidence so far; nothing but a hunch. Those two slinks have some hand in this Spirit Bear foolery, and I've got to catch them and their animal red-handed" . . .

"How far to the teepees of your people, oh Tanissi?" he asked the boy in Cree.

The youth pointed a leathery finger to the trees rimming a long point. Carnes nodded, glancing at the dimming sun, and measuring the distance to be traveled.

"THAT'S a good kid for an Indian," the sergeant informed the other man, pointing to where the red spot of a distant camp fire flickered against the black background of the spruce woods. "If we get out of this okay I'll see that he has some decent clothes and a trapping outfit."

In his mind the Mountie estimated the distance between the fire and Pehay's cabin as he said, "Vance will be watching that fire and when he sees fresh wood being put on it he'll know we're there—only we're not! Let's go."

"You take too much for granted, Dickie," Burke grumbled. "He ain't so thick in the head as all that. Bet a month's pay he watched us land here. Told you I saw something moving back in the brush behind us. Well, where are you heading for anyhow?"

"Over to that ridge crest." Carnes told him, ignoring the advice. "Tanissi says that's where the Spirit Bear comes from every night. Go easy with the canoe now. Not a sound, mind!"

The sergeant waited patiently until he noted a drift of clouds sailing toward the half moon. The first rolling puffs were obscuring the yellow crescent when Carnes pushed the birchbark off and drove the little vessel toward the ridge.

The two Mounties reached the willows fringing the shore, cautiously pulled the canoe up in the shelter of the bushes and set off. They kept their heads well down to avoid the stinging withes, zig-zagging about the clumps. They passed through bushes of dwarfed poplars and jack-pines, twisted by the ever-present winds, and reached the base of the rock-ridge. On silent moccasins they leaped from one boulder to another; crouched down, halting every now and then to listen.

"By cripes, this Jazz Bear is givin' me the willies—"

Carnes whirled about, white-faced under the moon's faint rays. He darted back, throwing Burke across a smooth rock, one hand pressed hard on the constable's lips.

ALMOST at the same moment, from directly overhead, the Spirit Bear's mocking *"Whoo-! Ou-oo!"* stabbed the night's quiet!

Carnes got to his hands and knees again immediately. He beckoned the constable to follow, and crept forward, to throw himself flat all at once.

Burke obeyed the urging hand, joined the sergeant, and glanced through a cleft in the rocks. About twenty feet below him a hard-packed trail twisted about through the boulders.

The sergeant's steel-muscled fingers bit into Burke's arm when a moment later his eyes visualized a huge moving bulk trotting down the trail. The soft padding of furred paws came distinctly on the thin air.

The two men gazed at each other wide-eyed when the thing passed from view in the direction of the Indian camp. The silence was broken by Burke exclaiming, low-toned, "By my sweet Aunt Polly, but it's a bear all right. Well now, wouldn't that give you a pain in the neck?"

The sergeant nodded agreement. "Know what I think, Andy?" he querried. "Pretty sure this is one of Vance's tricks. You'll remember that scare he threw into the Dogribs over on the Great Slave? I'm satisfied he's trapping on the reserve, and what's more that he's trying to scare these Chippewayans away so as to have a clear field for himself. That's a bear right enough. Guess he caught it as a cub and trained the brute. Easy to do that. You've seen performing bears in a circus often

enough."

"By golly, you're the hunchiest guy I ever gambled around with," Burke admitted. "What are you goin' to do—?"

His words were cut off by the bear's yowling roar from the river. Again and again it sounded. A faint chorus of screams answered. Then the huskies' howling notifying the waiting men that the night's terror was over for the Indians.

"Hope Mr. Vance is still watching us feeding that fire," the constable chuckled. "Reckon I'll have to take on the job of bear trainer now as well as policeman, cook, engineer, canoeman and a few other odd jobs. Not a dull moment in this Mounted Police show, is there?"

Carnes' hard hand signaled for silence. The Laughing Bear was returning. The sergeant's heart sounded loud as a drum beat, but above its thudding came the padding of the great feet below.

He saw the brown shadow pass up the gully, stand for a moment silhouetted against the clear sky, then disappear.

"Now, Andy!" Carnes whispered to the other man, as he slithered silently to the trail below, to stand there gazing at the huge pad marks.

"Get your gun out!" came the low order, Bent double, the two men reached the ridge crest and crept forward.

"Whew!" A whistling breath of surprise from the sergeant. They stopped momentarily staring at the trail, where it disappeared into what was apparently the mouth of a cave.

Both men threw themselves down, lying with distended nostrils, endeavoring to obtain some sound or scent from within. Nothing came. Carnes motioned with his hand and commenced working forward extended full length on the rocks.

Presently the sergeant picked up a faint glimmer of moonight penetrating through some of the cavern's crevices. Carnes forced himself to remain motionless until his eyes became accustomed to the gloom. Reaching back he kicked Burke softly with his moccasin.

With a bound the sergeant came to his feet, racing across the cave's uneven floor, toward an upright blur.

"Down! Down!" Canres yelled to the other man, throwing himself flat.

In that moment two shots rang out, filling the cavern with thunderous booming and the acrid odor of burned powder.

CARNES was up again, leaping forward; one outthrust hand tipped with glinting light. Above the racing man the bear's great bulk towered as the thing fumbled with its forepaws. And now the cave was filled with the thudding of moccasined feet and short, stabbing breaths.

Cr-ack. Another stab of yellow light when Carnes fired again.

The Laughing Bear swayed uncertainly for a moment, then suddenly crashed forward in a coughing heap. An automatic revolver clattered to the cave floor from one fore paw!

There was a second's eerie silence as the two men looked at each other, then back to the long-haired thing stiffening in death at their feet.

Burke stepped forward, poking at the bear with his Colt's. All at once an explosive oath broke from him. He dropped the revolver, snatched out his hunting knife and commenced hacking at the hide.

Half a dozen quick slashes at the thongs lacing the skin, and he threw the bear's head back to reveal Vance's heavy face, now white and still!

Carnes nodded, sheathing his revolver. "Came out pretty well as I thought, Andy," he said soberly. "I've seen the same game played on the Arctic coast with the Eskimos. Vance was scaring the Indians away so that he'd have this white fox country for himself. Huh-huh. He paid the price."

"Sure did," Burke's cheerful voice filled the cave with rumbling echoes. "Clever guy; wasted up here. See all that junk he had for rigging himself out. Some backstage this is, all right."

Carnes' eyes roved to the clothing and camp gear scattered about the cave walls. "Yeah," he grunted. "Strip that skin off, Andy. We'll take it back to the Chippewayans, otherwise they'll never believe but that this was a Spirit Bear. I'm going to send some of the hunters to bring Tarneau in. We'll meet at the Indian camp."

Burke's whistling followed the sergeant as he crawled out into the North's crisp, clean air.

FOSSILBUNK

By G. W. TWEEDDALE

Professor of Paleozoology was the lordly monicker the stranger dangled before the awe-struck Klondike sourdoughs. And the power of the name was playing havoc along rich Bonanza Creek.

ANDY BURKE laid the last rock atop the monument he was erecting and turned triumphantly to his partner. "Bill," he said, "this camp is going to be another Klondike. And, sitting as we are astride of the three best claims on Bonanza Creek, we're in the money. Why, I bet we clean up a whole million, and I ain't in favor of taking any less."

Bill Simons carefully folded his location notice, placed it in a tobacco can and tucked it into a niche between the rocks. "Andy," he chuckled, "when the Lord made little men he gave them a heap of optimism—kind of apologizing, I guess, for their size — and I agree, my small friend, with his judgment. He really owed them something for shortchanging them the way he——"

Andy Burke rose to his full five foot, one inch height, and glared disparagingly at his partner as he shouted: "I agree that little men have plenty of optimism, and there ain't no wonder. All they have to do, when they get to feeling low, is to look around at some of them there big hulks that just missed being beef cattle account of having been cheated out of two extra legs.

"And when you go to studying the situation, it's plain to see why the Lord went to all the trouble of making them there big, unwieldly lummoxes. And in case you ain't figured it out, it's this away: Having used all his choice clay in making a perfect man according to his model, he finds he has left over a heap of waste clay that ain't fit to use, and he throws it all together in a pile. And Sir, when that mass starts to walk away he ain't got the heart to stop it. Only 'llows he'll fasten on two extra legs on the next one and call it an ox."

Bill Simons lowered his bulk onto a flat boulder and smiled at his partner. "As you have now delivered your little speech," he said. "You can let yourself down and relax. Standing on tiptoe does not, as I have so often reminded you, add anything to your height. Just makes you look to a full-grown man like a bantam rooster getting ready to crow.

"And your self-applauding theory about the reason for a little man's optimism reminds me of a very old saying. 'Small things please small minds.' Which explains your evident satisfaction with yourself.

"Then that wild prediction for this Chisana Camp: Look, my small fry, at those saw-toothed porphyry mountains to our west. While even here on Bonanza Creek is slate and shale, no schist in sight. And you yell 'Klondike' and spout about a million dollar stake. I am again reminded of that old saying just quoted."

As a discreet cough interrupted Bill, the partners turned to face a tall, bewhiskered man. Bill Simon's quick eye gauged the stranger at a glance. First, from the twinkle in the deep-set eyes he knew that the man had been listening to their discussion. Second, the hands clasping the fur cap were long and slender and well-cared for, certainly not the hands of a miner.

"My name is Goudlemeyer," their visitor announced. "Professor of Paleozoology. These mountains to the north and west look most interesting. Early Cambrian, I would say. Who knows what fabulous treasures may be locked in the bowels of yonder range: What long sought-for fossils: What fortunes in gold: Perhaps the Mother Lode. Think of it, gentlemen, the great Mother Lode, which has been searched for by countless generations of men since the beginning of time, may be concealed in yonder mountains." The Professor concluded his remarks with a beaming smile directed at both his listeners.

But it was Andy Burke who stepped forward and extended his hand. Andy recognized in the professor a champion to his cause. "Professor," he said, "my name is Andrew Percival Burke, and I'm sure glad to meet up with a man of real intelligence." He looked condescendingly at his partner. "You know, a man can get just as hungry for intellectual companionship as he does for victuals. And I'm telling you, Professor, I'm just about starved in this respect. I can appreciate all you have said about this camp making history, knowing something of geology, like I do."

Bill Simons saw the Professor's beard tremble just a little as Andy ceased speaking. But Bill could not tell whether the Professor was concealing his mirth or smothering a yawn.

"Mr. Burke," said the Professor. "While my examination of the area has as yet been superficial, I feel that it has been sufficient to justify the positive pre-

diction that this camp will go down in history as one of the world's greatest placers. Later, after I have made an exhaustive examination of the terrain, I will know more. In fact, it is quite possible that I may gain geological data that will reveal the whereabouts of the preglacial channels responsible for these placer deposits. In which event, I will pass along the information to you miners." Again the Professor was beaming. "Now in our short acquaintance I have grown to like you gentlemen, and have, in just the last few moments, decided that you shall be the first, the very first, to profit financially from any information I may obtain. As for me, gold has no attraction. My only interest is in Paleozoology. And now, my dear friends, I must be returning to my studies, and shall bid you a very good day." He bowed profusely and turned away.

AS THE TALL form of the professor disappeared over a ridge, Bill Simons glanced down at his partner. Andy was again standing on tip-toe, rolling a cigarette with his left hand and pointing dramatically in the direction the professor had taken with his right.

"There goes real learning," Andy declared admiringly. "And I just hope, Partner, that you come to realize that from me and the Professor you can learn all there is to know about geology and the like, and all free of charge."

Bill picked up a rock and, with an underthrow, tossed it at a whistler perched on a piece of projecting rim rock. "Calling to mind a little story about a spider and a fly," he said. "I seem to see a certain half-pint of my acquaintance in the role of the fly, and in the bewhiskered stranger I see the spider. And now, while your bulging intellect wrestlers with this bewildering comparison, I am heading for the Recorder's office, happy in the thought that I have free access to such a vast reservoir of knowledge."

Bill Simons was worried as he left the tent. He hoped that Andy had been clowning, and had not accepted the professor at par. But he never could be sure about Andy. Bill himself was convinced that the man was either a crank, or belonged to the slicker type

He reached the tent-office of the District Recorder and filed his Notices of Location. Then headed for the roadhouse to pick up a few items of food their camp was short of. As he entered the big tent and elbowed his way through the crowd to the grocery department, a small man, in miner's boots and mackinaw, sauntered casually away from a group of men and stopped by Bill and extended his hand.

"Was just figuring to look you up," he said. "I have some news." Bill nodded in quick understanding, and the man continued on through the crowd.

Bill hastily selected his purchases, then hurried out the side entrance. Shorty Best must have some worthwhile news, he felt, or he would have waited till evening, when he and his partner would be, as was their habit, dropping into Bill's tent for a game of poker. He found Shorty seated on an empty packing case.

Shorty took one quick look over his shoulder, then whispered excitedly. "Bill, word has just come in that a new strike has been made back of the porphyry range, on Wilson Creek. And being in a slate and schist country it sounds good to me."

Bill Simons rested his pack on the tent rail and lighted his pipe. "How far?" he inquired.

"As the crow flies, ten miles," answered Shorty. "By pack trail, thirty-five. If we leave pronto we can, by traveling light, hit the head of Wilson Creek by noon tomorrow. My horse is already caught up, so you and Andy can use my camp outfit. No time to go to the Beaver after your stock. I've plenty of grub packed, too. Now, if you're going to take in this strike go get Andy and we'll hit the trail."

Bill adjusted his pack, then extended his hand. "Thanks, Shorty. Andy and I will be waiting for you at the Eldorado trail-crossing. So long."

Bill made the mile to camp in record time. He found Andy seated on his bunk with a much-used geological bulletin spread on his knees. Bill smiled broadly as he noted the deep frown on the little man's forehead.

"Brushing up on picture geology, I see," he teased. "Oh yes, there is a map, a simplified one, I believe."

Andy carefully folded the map, closed

the book, and rose to his feet. "Somebody's been talking," he stated haughtily. "And I'm glad to know that you're capable of learning. Didn't stop in at the Professor's on your way back, did you?"

"Considering the source, I choose to ignore both of the implications contained in your remark," Bill answered. "And I'll talk about more important business. We are leaving in just ten minutes for a new strike on Wilson Creek. And I suggest that you get your puny frame in motion and roll your pack."

Bill Simons and Andy reached the Eldorado Crossing just as Shorty broke over the bank. With a wave of the hand, Shorty started for the divide and the partners fell in behind. The pace never hurried, never slowed, but maintained an even gait that ate up the miles.

Dusk was falling as the three men reached the summit of the pass. Shorty made for some scrub spruce, a mile down the slope. The snow, which covered the summit to a depth of two feet, thinned perceptible as they descended. Only a skim of white remained at the grove, but an icy wind was blowing off the glacier bluffs to the north of the pass.

Andy and Shorty pitched camp, and Bill took an ax and attacked a dead spruce tree, slashing some of the smaller boughs. Soon the men were sipping hot tea and munching hardtack before the relaxing comfort and warmth of a bright, crackling fire.

Suddenly Andy pointed to the back-trail. "Stampede," he shouted. "And it looks as if all the Chisana Camp has turned out."

Bill looked towards the pass just as the moon emerged from behind a cloud bank and there, against the sky line, he could see many moving objects. Shorty Best took one look, then raced for his horse.

"We'll have to hit the trail, and now!" he called, over his shoulder.

In just a few minutes they were again on the move. There was no trail, but an almost full-moon made the descent not too hazardous. Shorty urged the little pack horse into a shuffling trot, while Andy speeded up and took the lead. Many times, in the next few hours, Bill marveled at his small partner's ingenuity. Once, when they were on the edge of a seemingly precipitous cliff, Andy, with almost uncanny accuracy, led them to a passable descent. Dawn was breaking as they reached the Wilson Creek beach and clambered down to the creek level.

A puzzled look spread over Bill Simons's face as he looked at the sheer walls of the granite cliffs across Wilson Creek. He nudged Shorty and pointed. Shorty Best took one look and leaped high into the air, then threw his hat to the ground and stamped it.

"This here calls for killing," he shouted wrathfully. "And when I get my hands on that there white-livered tadpole, Sam Williams, I'll make buzzard feed. Why, that wolverene told me this here was a schist country, and gravel pans went up to an ounce. And what do we find? Nothing but granite bluffs. Bet there ain't a flashet of gold this here side of the divide."

A HEARTY BURST of laughter caused Bill to turn angrily in the direction of Andy, who was mounted on a large boulder, holding aloft a long sliver of granite rock.

"This here," explained Andy, "is a crystalline rock, commonly known as granite. And I'm just announcing that yesterday, I opened a school on geology. Yes, Sir, and you fellows were my two first pupils. You see," Andy paused to snicker. "Figuring, as I always do, that experience is the best teacher, I don't say a word when Bill breaks the news about this here Wilson Creek strike and how it's a schist country. When I know that the geological survey shows a granite contact less than a mile west of Wilson Pass."

Bill Simons dived for his partner, but Andy was much too fast for him. "Why, you midget-brained, little weasel," shouted Bill. "I'll pull you apart and poison the buzzards with the remnants of your carcass. I'll——"

A choking sound from Shorty made both men turn. Shorty was sitting on the wet gravel, his face convulsed. As Bill started toward him, Shorty let lose with a roar of laughter. "Bill," he sputtered, between spasms. "That there partner of yours is holding four aces, and you and I have it coming. We both knew better'n to swallow this here Wilson Creek strike.

Just didn't use what the Lord gave us for brains."

"Brains," said Andy, who had again closed in to within speaking distance, "is described by Noah Webster as a soft, whitish, convoluted mass. And he says convoluted can mean twisted. Not that I'm making any personal insinuations."

"Intelligence, my small prune, only comes from cultivation of the soft, greyish matter you just referred to." Bill gave a snort of derision, "And, might I remark, when that same soft, greyish matter becomes addled, as in the case of a certain little termite of my acquaintance, the reasoning powers which normally act as a balance are gone."

"I do enjoy hearing you two fellows spout," interposed Shorty. "But I'm looking to the head of this here bar, where a good half of the Chisana camp is gathered, with more outfits coming in by the minute. I'm anxious to close in and see if that there Sam Williams is in the bunch. Grave digging will be easy on this here bar."

At that moment the aforementioned Sam Williams walked away from the crowd at the upper end of the bar. Shorty Best's hand dropped to his gun and he stepped clear of his two companions.

"Make for your iron, you damn polecat!" he commanded. "One of us is fertilizing this here bar."

Sam made no move for his gun, but continued to walk steadily forward, and only stopped when he stood in front of the irate Shorty. "What in Sam Hill is eating you?" he asked. "You know'd I ain't been across this here divide before."

For answer Shorty Best's hand shot out and Sam reeled back from the force of the open-handed slap. "Go for you gun, you sidewinder," yelled Shorty. "Or ain't you got the guts?"

The face of Sam Williams grew livid, and his hand flashed to the .45 at his belt. The next instant, the almost deafening roar of the two guns, fired almost at the same time, shattered the stillness. Then both Shorty and Sam were sprawled full length on the gravel bar, but not from the effect of bullets.

Andy Burke and Bill Simons had leaped a scant second before the trigger fingers had tightened. Andy was now sitting astride Sam Williams, while Bill held Shorty easily, one big hand bearing down into his middle.

"When you two firebrands decide to talk this matter over in a sane manner you will be allowed to get up." Bill grinned as he laid down the law. "Until that time you will remain exactly as you are. I don't know just what is behind all this but I'm willing to bet a hundred to one that this fake stampede was not started by a sourdough."

"You is correct in that," growled Sam Williams. "And if anybody butts in when I'm bumping off that there Professor I'll slit his gizzard wide open, even if he's my best friend. Now, Bill, if you will just call this here little bulldogs off me I agrees to wait till after I've bumped off that fossil-hunting varmint before I musses up that there polecat you is holding in your protecting embrace."

"Nobody is protecting me," bellowed Shorty. "But from where I am, it looks as if you were going to have to get leave from that half-pint of dynamite that's straddling your frame before you can even stand on your two legs. And if you know when you're lucky, Williams, you'll keep a bodyguard handy after Andy lets you go."

ANY FURTHER remarks from Shorty were muffled out, as Bill deftly flipped him on his face and bore down hard. Andy, following his partner's lead, pressed a hand firmly over the mouth of Sam Williams.

"Here you both lie, raving like a pair of mad malemutes. While that fake professor hightails it out of the country. Why, I bet right now he's well out on the McCarthy trail."

Bill was interrupted by a smothered sound from Sam. Andy removed the pressure on the hand covering his prisoner's mouth.

"I's willing to call it square with Shorty if he apologizes for the way he called me," Sam promised.

Bill raised Shorty's head just enough to permit him to speak. "You can lift your damn carcass off me," Shorty mumbled. "'pears like I flew off to Sam, and I 'pologize."

A moment later the two men were on

their feet, hands clasped. "You durned old fire-eater," said Sam. "Ain't you know'd me long enough to know I ain't staging no fake stampede?"

"Just mad at myself, I guess." Shorty answered sheepishly. "Although, back at camp you wouldn't tell me where you heard about this here strike. And, somehow, when I saw these here granite bluffs I got the fool notion you done tricked me."

"If you lovers is through holding hands, I make a move that we hit the trail," Andy Burke suggested. "I take it you are both anxious to see the Professor. And I just remembered I ran away and left some unfinished business myself."

As Shorty Best reached for the halter rope of his pony, a group of men joined them from the upstream camp, where several campfires indicated that at least some of the stampeders were not too angry to think of breakfast. Bill Simons recognized the man in the lead. It was Dan Sullivan, an operator from Fairbanks. Dan was laughing.

"Have any of you fellows seen a tall, bewhiskered stranger," he inquired. "It seems that some of the boys have business with him. This stranger, I am told, is, or was, accepting small contributions in gold for the furtherance of scientific research in Alaska. And in return he was giving out red hot tips on rich placer deposits."

"You can just tell them fellows that this here Professor is my meat," Sam shouted. "And for them to lay off. I gave this here polecat twenty-five ounces for the tip I got on this here Wilson Creek. I don't give a damn for that there gold, but I is bound on principle to make this here faker into buzzard feed."

"You have considerable competition," Dan Sullivan told Sam. "At least half a dozen of the men who arrived about the time I came in have designs on the scalp of Goudlemeyer. And, as at least two of them have already hit the back-trail, I would say that you, Sam, have at best a fourth mortgage on the scalp-lock of the gentleman in question."

Sam leaped for the bank and started across the bench in a long, easy dogtrot.

"I hope that Sam does not attempt to keep that pace all the way over the summit," Bill Simons said.

"If he doesn't slow down before he hits high ground we're going to have to throw the pack on my Bob horse and load the durned fool on," prophesied Shorty. "And seeing we have no business on this here Wilson Creek I move we grab a snack and then hit the trail."

"I agree about our having no further business on this side of the divide. But it is my opinion that each one of us who was tricked into this mad rush to Wilson Creek owes it to himself, as well as to the citizenry of Alaska, to make an example of this cheap grafter. So let's follow Shorty's suggestion."

"I heartily concur with your idea, Bill," Dan Sullivan said. "I myself will be content to start now and munch some hardtack on the trail."

"All set," shouted Shorty, as he again reached for the halter on his pony and started up the bench.

Dan Sullivan was close at Shorty's heels, and Bill started to fall in back of Dan, when he stopped and looked around. "Where in hell is Andy?" he asked.

"You mean that partner of yours?" asked Dan Sullivan in surprise. "Why, I thought you knew. Andy legged it out right after he made his little speech. I only heard the end, where he stated he had unfinished business in Chisana."

"I'll bet a plugged nickle that the little runt is planning to put something over on us. I'm telling you, fellows, that half-pint spends half of his time figuring ways to get my goat."

"In spite of it all, Bill, you have stuck with Andy for the past eight years. So I take it you like him as he is. I have known Andy for twenty year, and I can say that your judgment is good. Andy Burke is a very loyal partner." Dan Sullivan turned and looked down at Bill. "That is," he amended wih a chuckle. "He is when you are not in hearing distance."

Bill Simons made no comment. He was watching the bulky figure of Sam Williams, outlined on a hogback about half a mile ahead. Sam was climbing in long strides. But a big smile came when Bill caught sight of a tiny moving speck, far up the mountain and well to the left. He reached for his field glass and adjusted it to the range.

"That runt Andy," he remarked to no one in particular, "is really making time.

But why in hell is he so far south? He's heading directly into the Saw-Tooth range."

Dan borrowed Bill's glass and studied Andy's position for some moments. "Your partner is, I would say, using what the Lord gave him for brains. He will have tough going, but if he can make it through the Saw-Teeth he will hit the headwaters on Bonanza Creek and cut the distance to Chisana in three. In other words, Bill, even with tough going Andy should, barring mishap, be in camp before we reach the summit."

In silence the men continued to climb. Finally Bill spoke in a thoughtful manner, almost as if he were thinking out loud. "I can't figure just why Andy is in such a rush to reach camp. It is not all just the responsibility of citizenship in so far as the Professor is concerned. Although, the little cuss is a stickler for square dealing."

IT WAS approaching midnight when the three men reached the Eldorado crossing. Bill quickly bade his companions goodnight and headed for his tent. He was dead tired. Every aching muscle in his body rebelled against any further movement. But he gritted his teeth and climbed to his tent. He fully expected to see a lighted candle in the tent and to hear Andy's cheerful wisecracking. But all was dark.

He groped for a candle and lighted it, then staggered toward his bunk. He would stretch out for a short breather before preparing supper. For an hour he lay, relaxed and motionless. Then, as his eyes became heavy, he scrambled to his feet. Sleep would, at the moment, be far more welcome than food, but he had work to do. He must find Andy, then assist in the hunt for Goudlemeyer.

Bill picked up kindling and started the fire, then put on water for tea. He felt much refreshed from his short rest. Some hot food, and he would be ready for the trail again.

Just then an agonizing human wail, sounding from the direction of the Bonanza Creek trail, brought Bill around to face the tent entrance. He reached for his gun belt, which he had left on the bunk, and leaped through the door and down the trail. The trail was easily discernible. And a pinkish glow on the eastern horizon heralded the rising sun.

Bill reached the bench overlooking the tent town of Chisana and started down. Then, as his eyes focused on the trail ahead, he skidded to a halt and stared in momentary disbelief. A horseman was advancing up the trail, traveling at a fast walk. Just ahead of the horse stumbled the tall, lanky Professor Goudlemeyer. The horseman was Andy Burke, mounted on his own pony.

He was leaning over the horse's neck and prodding the Professor with a slim pole, held in his left hand. A heavy .45 rested menacingly in his right. Andy was talking in a loud voice, apparently trying to drown out the low moaning of his prisoner.

"I'm," he was saying, "willing to donate that twenty ounces you snitched from me; but, as I done told you back at the Beaver, I'm relieving you of all that dust you stole from those other miners. Also, as I've before stated, you're taking a forced march across the Wilson Creek Divide on short rations."

Catching sight of Bill, Andy called. "Hi there, Partner. You going some place? Better turn back or you'll miss a good show." He reined in his pony and beamed down on Bill Simons.

The limbs of the Professor crumpled from sheer weariness, and his bloodshot eyes fastened pleadingly on Bill. "Please, Mr. Simons," he wined. "Call this fireball off me. I'm dying from exhaustion, I repeat, I am about to expire. If you refuse to intervene you will be found guilty of brutal murder." Bill Simons ignored the Professor.

"How did you succed in overtaking this sidewinder?" he inquired of Andy. "He must have had a good head start."

It was not often that Andy had such an advantage in height when talking with Bill. He threw a leg over his saddle pommel and gazed down on his partner.

"Knowing that if justice was to prevail in the case of this here Professor, more'n talking had to be done. I figured a short cut across the Saw Teeth. But when I was crossing Glacier Park I decided that there was no use in bearing north to get to Chisana, when this here hyena would

ANIMAL TRICKS

In the great Northwest the lynx is the deadly foe of the fox, which has little chance of escape when the snow is soft. Reynard makes good time during the first five or six miles of his flight, although he sinks deeply at each bound. Meanwhile, the lynx just slogs along at the same steady trot, and finally catches up to his victim.

The lynx has one weakness—that of following the trail of a trapper just out of curiosity. If the trapper suspects that he is being followed he just lies in ambush and comes back to the cabin with a good pelt. A beaver, too, has been known to kill a lynx. One day in the early spring an Indian saw a lynx crouching on a log, watching the beaver hole in the ice. At length a beaver came up cautiously, and crawled out of the water. The lynx sprang, but the beaver dived back into the hole, with the lynx hanging onto him.

The Indian waited: He might get one skin out of this fight—maybe two. But neither the beaver nor the lynx came to the surface. He cut himself a forked pole and fished about on the bottom of the pond. Finally he found the bedraggled body of the lynx. The beaver had drowned him.

be hightailing it for the White River. So, naturally, I headed south and reached the Beaver last night, just when this polecat was climbing aboard my horse, which he had caught up."

Andy slapped a black leather satchel strapped to his saddle pack. "This here bag has all the swag the Professor collected in Chisana. And while I haven't weighed it up, I estimate its weight at around two hundred ounces."

Bill was not awed by his partner's height or achievement in capturing the Professor singlehanded. "One question, my little man," he said sarcastically. "Just when did the Professor get you for that twenty ounces? We only met him yesterday, a scant two hours before hitting the Wilson Creek trail, and at that time he promised us a tip sometime in the future."

Andy scowled down at the Professor. "That's right, Bill," he answered soberly. "It was just ten minutes after you hightailed it for the Recorder's office that he comes puffing up the hill and tells me he is passing out that tip. Said he knew all

the time he was talking with us that Wilson Creek had real pay, but wanted to satisfy himself we were okay. Then, when the damned polecat was leaving he told me how his research work was dependent on contributions. And I, like a sucker, dishes out my twenty ounces. That's why I was looking over those maps when you showed up. It was right then, as I told you and Shorty on Wilson Creek, I started my school on geology."

Sam Williams, with a loud shout, came racing up the trail, brandishing his gun. "I's obliged, Andy, for delivering this here prisoner," he panted. "Me and the gang just came in. We was headed for the Skola, to cut off his retreat, when Shorty spotted you in the Beaver flat. Now all the citizens of this here camp is assembled, awaiting this spotted cat."

"Which means," said Andy, with a great sigh. "That I'm cheated out of a little trip to Wilson Creek." Poking the Professor with his long pole, the little man snappped. "Climb onto your dogs, Whiskers. I'm releasing you to the tender mercies of a Miner's Court. One thing I'm sure you have already learned: Sourdough miners are maybe open-hearted when they think they are giving to a good cause. But they ain't easy took, not even on a new bunco, such as Fossilbunk."

The Ballad of Gum-Boot Ben

By Robert Service

He was an old prospector with a vision bleared and dim.
He asked me for a grubstake, and the same I gave to him.
He hinted of a hidden trove, and when I made so bold
To question his veracity, this is the tale he told.

"I do not seek the copper streak, nor yet the yellow dust.
I am not fain for sake of gain to irk the frozen crust;
Let fellows gross find gilded dross, far other is my mark;
Oh, gentle youth, this is the truth—I go to seek the Ark.

"I prospected the Pelly bed, I prospected the White;
The Nordenscold for love of gold I piked from morn till night;
Afar and near for many a year I led the wild stampede,
Until I guessed that all my quest was vanity and greed.

"Then came I to a land I knew no man had ever seen,
A haggard land, forlornly spanned by mountains lank and lean;
The nitchies said 'twas full of dread, of smoke and fiery breath,
And no man dare put foot in there for fear of pain and death.

"But I was made all unafraid, so, careless and alone,
Day after day I made my way into that land unknown;
Night after night by camp-fire light I crouched in lonely thought;
Oh, gentle youth, this is the truth—I knew not what I sought.

"I rose at dawn; I wandered on. 'Tis somewhat fine and grand
To be alone and hold your own in God's vast awesome land,
Come woe or weal, 'tis fine to feel a hundred miles between
The trails you dare and pathways where the feet of men have been.

"And so it fell on me a spell of wander-lust was cast.
The land was still and strange and chill, and cavernous and vast;
And sad and dead, and dull as lead, the valleys sought the snows;
And far and wide on every side the ashen peaks arose.

"The moon was like a silent spike that pierced the sky right through;
The small stars popped and winked and hopped in vastitudes of blue;
And unto me for company came creatures of the shade,
And formed in rings and whispered things that made me half afraid.

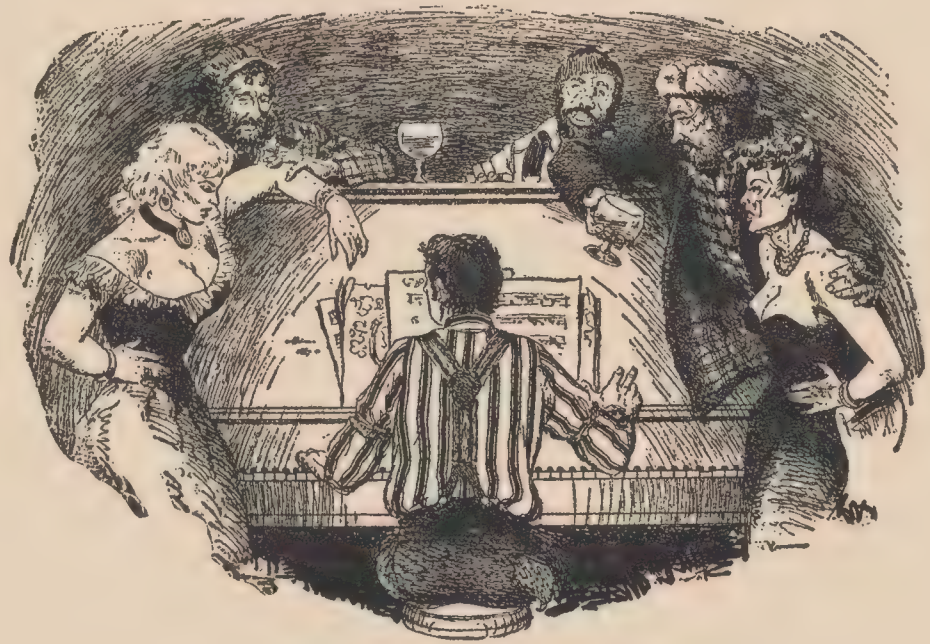
"And strange though be, 'twas borne on me that land had lived of old,
And men had crept and slain and slept where now they toiled for gold;
Through jungles dim the mammoth grim had sought the oozy fen,
And on his track, all bent of back, had crawled the hairy men.

"And furthermore, strange deeds of yore in this dead place were done.
They haunted me, as wild and free I roamed from sun to sun;
Until I came where sudden flame uplit a terraced height,
A regnant peak that seemed to seek the coronal of night.

"I scaled the peak; my heart was weak, yet on and on I pressed.
Skyward I strained until I gained its dazzling silver crest;
And there I found, with all around a world supine and stark,
Swept clean of snow, a flat plateau, and on it lay—the Ark.

"Yes, there, I knew, by two and two the beasts did disembark,
And so in haste I ran and traced in letters on the Ark
My human name—Ben Smith's the same. And now I want to float
A syndicate to haul and freight to town that noble boat."

I met him later in a bar and made a gay remark
Anent an ancient miner and an option on the Ark.
He gazed at me reproachfully, as only topers can;
But what he said I can't repeat—He was a bad old man.



THE "RAGTIME KID"

"The kid that handled the music box" the night Dangerous Dan McGrew was shot in the Malemute Saloon died quietly in Seattle, according to the United Press.

Hartley Claude Myrick, sixty-five, was the "Ragtime Kid" of Robert Service's poem of the Yukon. He was a sourdough in the northland at the age of thirteen and played the first piano brought into Skagway, Alaska.

In 1907 he was playing a piano in White Horse, Yukon Territory, the night Service got the inspiration for "The Shooting of Dan McGrew." The poet once claimed that the names in his ballad were fictitious, but the poem was based on actual happenings.

Myrick became known from Nome to Chilkoot Pass as the "Ragtime Kid." He followed the gold rushes of the north and later the glitter of the stage, pounding on his "music box." But he didn't make a strike until he set up business in Seattle.

He was wiped out in the 1929 Stock Market crash, but re-established himself in business and lived comfortably until his death last July.

During World War II the "Ragtime Kid" played for service men in the Seattle U.S.O. building.

Murder Without Penalty

By WILLIAM BROCKIE
(EX-CONSTABLE, ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE)

A weird narrative of fiendish Northland murder that stumped the best brains of the Mounties.

THERE MAY be plenty of perfect crimes committed but because of their perfection the police never even hear of them. It is the almost perfect crimes that make the trouble for both the perpetrators and the police. One case I worked on came so close to being perfect it caused me to make an error that almost ruined my career in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and occasioned a serious miscarriage of justice.

But—and this is the strange aspect of the case— the man who committed the crime could be killed tomorrow by a certain other man, and the law could not touch the murderer!

In the first place, I am forced to admit that I blundered badly. The upshot was that one man was sentenced to be hanged; another to a term of imprisonment.

At the time of this happening I was in charge of the Peel River Post. One spring day—March 29th—two young men called. They gave their names as Harold Kearson and Charles Ripley. They were drifting north on a prospecting trip. I checked over their supplies carefully, saw that they were well-equipped and sent them on their way. At the time I didn't dream that within a few months I would be called on to arrest one of them on a charge of murder and robbery.

In September, just before freeze-up, Charles Ripley again called at my post. He was played out from paddling upstream for two days but he managed to narrate a wild and lengthy story.

Ripley said that he and Kearson had drifted slowly along when one day they came across an isolated cabin. Its occupant, an elderly prospector, was dying of scurvy. (There was a lot of scurvy in the north that year because vegetable crops had been frozen.)

They did what they could for the sick man, whose name they learned was Curtis Martin, but he died just the same. Before he died Martin made a rough will, leaving all he had to Ripley and Kearson, making but one condition: they were to turn half of the gold already on hand and what they worked from his claim over to the authorities. This half was to go to Martin's son, provided the authorities could locate him. Ripley and Kearson willingly agreed to the terms because there was quite a lot of raw gold in the shack and the claim was a real strike. But that same clause in the will was the cause of an almost perfect crime being perpetrated.

The partners worked the claim all summer until it petered out. They checked over the gold on hand and it rated about twenty thousand dollars. Mighty good returns for one season's work.

Then, according to Ripley's story, came friction. His partner, Kearson, was against turning over half the gold to the authorities. He wanted to slide out of the country quietly and not report at any of our posts.

Ripley said that he was dead against the suggestion. He wanted to keep the promise made to Martin. The partners argued the matter so violently they almost came to blows.

Seeing that matters had come to a show-

down, Ripley took the will and their only rifle and told Kearson that he was heading for the nearest police post to explain everything. They could then leave the country with their stake and all would be in order.

Kearson produced a pistol, ordered Ripley to drop the rifle and will and head inland. He also told Ripley that when he returned he would find the shack burned down and he, Kearson, with most of the gold missing. He added that he would leave part of the gold in the cache, so that when Ripley returned with the police they would find the small amount of gold and not belive Ripley's story that Kearson had threatened him. And, with devilish cunning, he had also planned something worse.

RIPLEY said that seeing cold murder in Kearson's eyes he was only too glad to head into the bush as ordered, but he did not go far from camp. Shortly after noon he sighted flames and smoke. He waited until the next morning, figuring that by then Kearson would be well on his way. Then he cautionsly approached the camp. He saw no sign of Kearson; smoldering ashes were all that remained of the cabin. He was then surprised to find the rifle leaning against a tree. It was fully loaded. Then another thing surprised him. At its usual mooring he saw their canoe. He picked up the rifle, got into the canoe and headed for my post.

To me, Ripley's story seemed utterly preposterous. I did not tell him so but ordered him to guide me back to the burned-out camp. When we arrived I poked about in the cabin's ashes and discovered, to my amazement, the charred remains of a human being!

While I had been poking around Ripley had remained seated on a log, nursing the rifle and eyeing my every movement. He was in a highly nervous condition. I saw that he had not noticed my discovery. I walked over to him and asked him to show me their cache. In it I found several pouches of raw gold. A later assay proved it to be worth two thousand nine hundred dollars. There was also a supply of food in the cache.

That intensified my doubt of Ripley's story, I managed to separate him from the rifle, then told him of the body I had found. He appeared terribly shocked. I led him to the corpse and compelled him to help me lift it clear of the ruins.

Mounties have to be customs officers, coroners, and everything else, as well as being policemen. I performed a rough-and-ready post-mortem on the body and it wasn't a nice job. A burned human form is unpleasant to handle. This one was almost totally consumed. Every bit of skin and flesh had been burned from the skull, and the corpse was completely unrecognizable.

But the autopsy brought to light a damning piece of evidence—a small hole in the carbonized skull. It had been made by a .22-calibre rifle bullet. I found the smashed bit of lead. I asked Ripley what he had to say to that. He stuck to his story.

I hunted around in the ashes again and unearthed a number of tell-tale articles where the body had lain. Signet ring, watch and other personal effects. After cleaning them Ripley identified them as having once belonged to his partner, Kearson. He offered as explanation that someone might have overheard him and Kearson quarrelling and Kearson's plan, also learned of the amount of gold on hand. After seeing Ripley head into the bush, this unknown had shot Kearson and taken most of the gold; had, in fact, carried out, in part, Kearson's own plans. I thought this suggestion a bit too thin and placed Ripley under arrest.

In the first place, for all I knew, the gold I had found constituted the total amount. In the second place, the burned man had received a bullet through the head. In the third place, the canoe had not been taken. Other points were, Ripley had followed the safest plan, remained in the district and reported the crime himself, pretending ignorance of a corpse in the ruins. Had he left it to chance for the crime to be discovered, and a check-up of my district showed he had run for it, he would have been apprehended, for it is almost impossible for a wanted man to avoid eventual arrest no matter what part of the world he goes to. Your clever criminal always pays a lot of attention to that last point. Plans to avoid even the faintest suspicion. The ignorant crook commits a

crime then runs for supposed safety. A foolish thing to do.

At the time I thought Ripley had made a serious mistake in not smashing in the burned skull before reporting at my post, and not telling a simple story that he had returned from a hunting trip and found the cabin burned and the body of his partner in it. I thought that he had altogether over-played his part.

We buried the charred remains alongside the grave of Martin, the aged prospector. Owing to the stony nature of the ground we could not dig a deep grave, so, as Ripley and Kearson had done for Martin, we piled rocks on top to prevent wild animals from molesting the corpse. I then took Ripley to my post.

While holding him there awaiting word from the outside, I had all our fellows working hard to try to find out if anyone had disappeared recently. Not that we can keep tabs on everyone in the north. It's a big country and harbors many people who prefer to remain unknown. The result of the check-up was that no known person had died that summer, and, most significant, no one had ever heard of an aged prospector named Martin!

I tackled Ripley about it; asked him why either he or Kearson had not reported to my post at once when Martin had died. Ripley replied that the gold fever had got into them and they hated to waste the time. They intended to do so on their way out in the Fall.

His answer raised the question in my mind as to whether the grave he had shown me as being Martin's wasn't just part of a shrewd killer's plan. I doubted the old prospector part of his story from that moment. Later investigation proved that grave to be empty, but the fact was not learned until months later, for several feet of snow made it impossible to locate and open the hole just then.

MURDER is a grave charge and executions are ghastly affairs. I had charged Ripley with murder. I wanted to give him every chance to prove his innocence if he was innocent. I tried my best to get his viewpoint. But the more I thought about it the worse it looked for him.

A fellow who worked at a crematorium once told me of the terrific heat required to reduce a corpse to ashes. There is not one case on record of human bodies being totally destroyed in burned buildings, but few people know of this physical fact. I came to the conclusion that the aged prospector, Curtis Martin, had never existed; that Ripley and Kearson had happened on a good claim by chance; that when it petered out Ripley shot Kearson, then attemped to hide all traces of his crime by trying to destroy Kearson's corpse by fire. Noting that there were charred remains to tell a tale, he had paddled to my post, conjuring up his story on the way.

I told Ripley my conclusions. But he stuck to his story.

A few weeks later I was ordered to take him to Edmonton, Alberta, to stand trial.

I was the chief witness. The Crown Prosecutor made ten points out of every word I said and hammered home each point.

Ripley had been found in possession of raw gold, food, a loaded .22-calibre rifle and a canoe. Means to kill and run. Instead of taking flight he had attempted the safest plan, remained in the district and himself brought the police to the scene of the crime. Such an act proved that the accused had planned his dastardly crime with consummate nerve and skill. For months, for reason of personal gain, he had schemed to murder his partner. The story Ripley had told to the police was preposterous.

Ripley had a good defense counsel and he did his best, but he hadn't an argument left after the prosecution got through. He argued that the post-mortem had been performed by a policeman without the slightest training in medicine. He tried other arguments. He then tried to get the charge reduced to manslaughter; stating that his client had admitted to quarreling bitterly with his partner. It was useless. The jury brought in a verdict of murder on November 10, 1926, and Ripley was sentened to be hanked by the neck until he was dead. As is usual in Canada, the date of the execution was set three months ahead—February 11, 1927.

I was commended for my good work and given thirty days' furlough. I decided to spend my leave in Edmonton and have my teeth attended to. I went to my usual dentist. While working on me he talked a lot about the Ripley case which had aroused wide interest. And then he casually mentioned a simple fact that made me jump higher than any of his drilling—the simple fact that no matter how badly a corpse is burned it is rarely that sound teeth are destroyed! I had barely glanced at the jaws of the remains I had found in my haste to get an unpleasant job over and done with.

After thinking the matter over, I journeyed to the Fort Saskatchewan Gaol, a few miles outside Edmonton, where Ripley was confined. He was very decent to me. He told me that Kearson had possessed a perfect set of teeth. Also, though, he added that there was no doubt in his mind but that the charred remains I had found were those of Kearson. That assertation made me wonder if he was on the point of breaking down and confessing. I talked to him for a long time but he persisted he was innocent. I still did not believe him.

I HAD been back at my post about two months when I was notified that the date of Ripley's execution had been set forward to permit further investigation of the case. Ripley's counsel had appealed on the grounds that the autopsy on the remains had been made by a man unskilled in medicine, myself, and the Court of Appeal had upheld him. The news brought me wonderful relief.

In June the chief surgeon of the northern detachments, accompanied by a private doctor and Ripley's counsel, arrived at my post. I took them to the scene of the crime. I insisted that we open the grave supposed to contain Martin's remains first. It was, as I thought, empty! Ripley's counsel, who had hammered me hard all through the trial, paled a bit at that. We then opened the other grave. It contained the remains I had found in the charred embers of the shack.

In the clearing the two medical men held their post-mortem. It was then my turn to get a jolt. The upper and lower jaws contained not one single tooth!

Of course, we had only the word of a man fighting to save his neck from the noose that Kearson had possessed perfect teeth. On the other hand, victims of scurvy invariably lose their teeth before they die.

I worked furiously from then on. I got a detailed description of Kearson from Ripley and had it circulated. Weeks later he was picked up in Montreal. He broke down and confessed to what we all suspected after the last post-mortem. He had dug up Martin's corpse, put a bullet through the skull, then placed it in the shack and set fire to the building.

Kearson had committed an almost perfect crime. He had avoided suspicion by having substituted a corpse and a few personal trinkets which would lead the police to believe that the body was that of himself. He had left the canoe behind and made his way outside by the simple procedure of walking thirty miles or so upstream to a native camp. There he hired a canoe and two Indian paddlers. He changed his name and reported at some of our posts on his way to railhead at Waterways. As there was no hue and cry out for a man corresponding to his appearance, he was treated with the courtesy accorded any other traveller.

But with all his cunning Kearson made one serious mistake—that of substituting the body of an *aged, toothless* man for his own. And he is now entirely outside the protection of the law for this technical but legal reason:

Charles Ripley had been brought to trial for murdering a man named Harold Kearson. He had been found guilty and sentenced to be hanged. The discovery that Kearson was still alive and the confession he made caused the authorities to have Ripley's sentence quashed. Under our law, if a man has his sentence quashed he cannot be tried and sentenced again for the same crime!

Kearson was tried, convicted and sentenced on two charges: robbery and machination. He served his sentence and is again a free man. Therefore, if Ripley murdered Kearson tomorrow, the law could not touch him. Because of the near perfection of his crime, Kearson is today entirely outside the protection of the law.

The crack and echo of a high-powered rifle sent Ryan flying into the swirling rapids.

BONANZA!

By DAN CUSHMAN

The Stormwind Cache! **A quarter-ton of hidden yellow gold; jackpot bait for hungry adventurers. Jim Ryan swapped his forty-dollar Seattle suitcase for a packsack and moosehide mucks . . . and found himself riding a skin boat into the mouth of hell.**

JIM RYAN had reached Moyukuk City the hard way.

He'd taken a train up the narrow gauge from Telaqua Bay. At Apex he'd swapped his forty-dollar Seattle suitcase for a packsack and a pair of moosehide mucks, and had traveled afoot northward through the Squawman Hills. It was midnight, and he'd been thirty-six hours without food when he finally waded across windrows of thawing placer gravel to Moyukuk's one long street. He'd saved ten days by not waiting for the river steamboat, but he'd paid for every hour of it.

Seattle had left him soft. His legs ached, his back was stiff. He spat, and laughed from one side of his mouth, and cursed.

Ryan, he said to himself, *here you are back again after all the brags you made. You're back, and worse than being back, you're broke. Ryan, you're a great lad in adversity, but prosperity is more than you can stand. Ryan, what you need is someone to stand beside you. What you really need is someone to stand behind you and kick your seat higher than your shoulders.*

He was about thirty. He was six feet tall, though a breadth of frame developed in the timber camps of Washington made him seem short. His face was slightly battered, and it had a pleasing ugliness. A couple of

his teeth had been kicked out and replaced with gold. He had formed the habit of carrying a twig, match or toothpick in one corner of his mouth, giving the perpetual impression of just having left the dinner table.

It was a twig he was carrying now. He spat it away, hitched up his sourdough pants, and waded the Alaska muck to the front door of Sky-noo Sammy's Bar and Raffle.

Midnight had brought with it a half-darkness, so lamps were lighted, shining ruddily through the smoked-up windows.

He kicked the door open and stood with his packsack balanced on one shoulder, looking around.

Sky-noo's was a battered, plank-and-tincup saloon with a sour smell of beer and stale tobacco, but it was home to Ryan's nostrils and he breathed deeply of it, just as he'd breathed the odor of the coastal forest when he got off the boat at Telaqua Bay.

A rawboned, muck-smeared miner saw him and bellowed, "My gawd, it's Ryan! There he is, the old Billy-be-damned Guggenheim himself, back for another ton of Chilliwook gold, or did them slickers in the States roll you for a chechako and skid you out the back door?"

The miner had guessed it. They'd rolled him, all right, and they'd given him the skids.

With a grandiose gesture, Ryan pitched his warbag to the corner and shouted, "To the bar, all of you! Sammy, throw away that leopard milk and set out the best you have in the house. Bonded Kentucky, that's what Ryan buys for his friends." He then turend his attention to the rawboned miner. "Travis, those Seattle necktie-punks never saw the hour they could roll a son of the Ryans and skid him from the back door with his pockets plucked."

He was thinking that he'd got out of Seattle in good shape. However, there'd been a girl named Irene in San Francisco, a horse named Best Regards at Tijuana, and a pair of dice that refused to come up Little Joe over in Carson City. And in all of those places there'd been champagne. Ryan still felt a little throb in his head at the thought of champagne.

He took paper money from his mackinaw pocket and slammed on the bar in the manner of one who draws on a bottomless supply. Actually, it was almost the end of a twelve thousand dollar stake he'd left the country with.

After taking on a couple of bourbons, Ryan said, "It's old Dave Carson I'm looking for. The friend of my heart I grubstaked up on Porcupine Creek. A sick man he is, and I'm taking him back to the States."

The poker game had got under way again, but at mention of Dave Carson a squat, black-whiskered prospector tossed in his cards and walked over, slightly splay footed in his mucklucks.

"You mean there's something wrong with Dave? I saw him ten-twelve days ago at Tonka Landing. He didn't look sick to me."

Come to think of it, Ryan didn't know what was wrong with Dave, either. It was just that a telegram had been waiting for him in Telaqua—

Ryan they're after me. If you want to see me alive be in Moyukuk by the fifteenth. Dave.

Until that moment, Ryan thought it had been the black cough, or whiskey, or some other hazard of the country. Now the message hit him with new significance. He wondered—then he shrugged it off. Nobody'd be after Dave. He didn't have an enemy in the world.

Ryan said, "What day's this? Eighteenth? He should be here in town."

Nobody had seen him. The steamboat had come down but Dave hadn't been on it.

Sammy Grussman, the proprietor, a red-headed Irish Jew, was looking at him grimly from behind the bar. "I don't want to worry you, Ryan, but I heard something. You remember that Russian breed they call Johnny Louse? Well, he came down from that Porcupine country on the tail end of the big Chinook and said Dave had gone crazy."

"Crazy!"

"That's what he said. Of course, I didn't put too much weight in it because the Louse isn't too bright himself, but he said Dave had it in his head somebody was trying to kill him. Wait now. Wait until you hear the rest and decide for yourself whether Dave's crazy. He thought somebody was after him, trying to kill him

for something he had. Want to know what it was?"

"Of course I want to know."

"Now, Ryan, steady yourself. They were after a girdle."

"You mean one of those things like a corset that women—"

"Don't ask me about girdles. I'm not the one that's just been to the States. I'm telling you what Louse said. A girdle. And do you know who Carson thought was killing him to get it back? A girl. A white girl with black hair and blue eyes. And from the way Dave talked about her she didn't need any damned girdle."

Everyone was hee-hawing about it. Heat and tobacco smoke and liquor combined to make Ryan feel unsteady. He got outside by himself and let his head clear.

Dave hadn't gone crazy. He wasn't that kind. He was in trouble. He was in a whole hell of a lot of trouble or he'd never have sent the telegram.

RYAN SPENT a third of his remaining cash for an outfit, and before noon the next day he set out, paddling a canoe upriver toward Tonka Landing.

The Kuskokwim flowed between great barren hills. Snow still lay in the gullies, and a ceaseless wind, cold and damp, blew down on him, making his teeth chatter despite his mackinaw, despite the springtime sun swinging around the horizon.

He slept at a Siwash fishing camp, lulled by the wind and the steady creak of the fishwheels, through the short hours of twilight and night. He went on, fighting the high current of midstream, hunting the quiet waters near shore, picking his way through vast accumulations of driftwood from the high waters of other years. Fatigue lay like paralysis and pain in his body, but he went on, and fatigue left him as his body toughened and the fatty poisons of civilization were sweated off.

The country to the north and east became more rugged. Broad valleys were choked with cottonwoods just coming to bud. He passed the hundred mouths of the Neversink, and on the third evening he brought his canoe up to some steamboat docks with the log and shanty town of Tonka Landing on the hillside beyond.

The warehouse and telegraph office of the Yukon Transportation Company had a new coat of red barn paint, but nothing else seemed to have changed. The same loafers were on the bench at Gilligan's, the same gaunt malemutes barked and showed their fangs from the pens by Cultus Charley's.

He went inside the ramshackle, two-story hotel and found the owner, Blind Tom Addison, behind the desk.

Blind Tom, a scarecrow tall man with a grayish complexion recognized his voice and cackled, "So you come back like Dave said. Well, they all do sooner or later once they have this Yukon muck in their bloodstreams."

He shook Tom's hand and said, "Dave's here then?"

"He was here." The cheerfulness left him. "That was better'n a week ago. He wasn't drunk and happy like he used to be, though."

"Sick?"

"No-o. Got a room and stayed there. Used to send the Injun out for likker. Sit there and drink it by himself but it didn't get him drunk. When a man drinks and doesn't get drunk there's something bothering him. Then one morning—" He snapped his fingers. "Gone. Just gone. Left owing me twenty-two dollars. Of course, he'd be welcome to stay here a year if he was broke, but just walking out isn't like him. Well, maybe he went to Moyukuk."

"I just came up from Moyukuk." He found a twenty and two silvers, pressed it in the blind man's hand.

"Oh, hell, I'm not worried—"

"Take it. I grubstake him, you know."

Ryan signed for a room and paused a quarter way up the rickety stairs with his packsack on his shoulder.

"Did Dave say anything about a black-haired girl chasing him to get her girdle back?"

Blind Tom doubled over from laughter. "Oh hell, Ryan, you ought to know better'n that. Dave's too old for that kind of stuff."

"They're never to old to talk about it."

Ryan climbed the stairs and walked down the hall. Even in summer it was draughty and cold. One winter he'd stayed

in the hotel when the thermometer in this upper hall stood at twenty-two below.

He sat around in the room, smoked, and thought about Dave. He chewed a match and looked out the window. It was cheerless and gray, with a fine, cold rain falling. He lighted a lamp and looked at himself in the piece of rusty mirror. He had a three-day growth of whiskers. He was hungry but he didn't feel like eating. Dave was the best friend he'd ever had, and slowly the certainty had been rising in him that he was dead.

He cursed, and without realizing what he was going to do, turned and swung his fist to one of the door panels. He hadn't done that since he was a show-off kid. The panel was split and two of his knuckles bled. He laughed at himself, but he felt better.

He went to the American Bar and drank whiskies. The swamper had a barber chair in a back room, so he spent a dollar on a shave. Half the men in Tonka were at the American by then, but nobody was able to tell him about Dave.

It was past midnight when he groped back to his room through the dark hotel.

There was no lock on the door. Nobody ever locked a door in Alaska. He went inside, closed the door with his heel, and took the chewed-up match from his teeth to light the lamp. Suddenly he realized there was someone in the room.

He started back, hand by habit going to the place at his waist where he'd carried the .38 Smith & Wesson on his way up-river, but the gun wasn't there. He'd left it in his warsack.

The click of gun hammer stopped him. Then a voice followed it from the blackness. "Stand where you are."

"Sure. I got no gun."

"Well, I have. Don't make me use it."

Ryan remembered the voice from somewhere. It had been a long time before, down in the timber camps, in B.C., or Washington, or off Port Orford. It was too dark to get even a shadow impression of him, but he was a heavy man, Ryan could tell that by the creak of the floor as he moved.

A match flared up in his fingers, he lit the lamp, put the chimney on. Ryan still barely noticed his face. All he could see was the big, round muzzle of gun aimed at him. It was a bulldog forty-five, the world's most inaccurate firearm, but at that range it would cut him in half.

"Well, Ryan!" the man said with a nasty smile. "So it is you."

Ryan still had trouble placing him. He was in his middle thirties, a rugged rangy man with broad shoulders, and he might have been handomei f his face hadn't been spoiled by a chin that was long and a mouth too small. The mouth and jaw reminded him of a picture he'd once seen of Napoleon.

"Well, Ryan, what the hell? Don't you remember your old friends? Battles? Bill Battles, Texada Inlet, the Andraes-Me-Conochie timber war? I remember you. I remember that night you lost those front teeth fighting with Big Ole Christopherson."

His eyes kept moving between the gun and Battles' face. "You don't need that thing pointed at me. I hold no grudge for the things that happened at Texada. I never put faith in the story that you got Koval from behind. Anyhow, it's all water over the falls."

"Oh, that." Apparently Battles had forgotten all about Koval. He gestured with the vicious little barrel. "Open your jacket. All right, now turn the pockets out." He saw that Ryan was unarmed, put the gun on the bed and sat down beside it.

Ryan asked, "Well, what the hell do you want of me?"

He didn't get an answer. After thinking, and running his tongue around his small mouth, Battles said, "I hear you struck it rich."

"I hit a little pay streak. Enough for a vacation outside."

"You mean you left with twenty thousand and went broke in one winter?"

Ryan didn't like to be reminded. He thought of champagne and made a wry face. "I don't know as it's any of your affair. If you're here after what I got left, well, take it and be damned." He took out what he had, tossed it on the table—crumped bills, small change, matches and brass beer checks all mixed together.

Battles didn't more than glance at it. He sat forward, elbows on his thighs, a smile on his face that twisted his long,

loose jaw to one side.

"Tell me why you came back."

He cried, "I came back because I was broke."

BATTLES picked up the gun. He cocked it and took aim at Ryan's forehead. "I never liked you, Ryan. I wouldn't mind killing you. Ever see anybody shot right between the eyes? It leaves a big, black hole like the burnt end of a cigar, and the back of your head—"

"Put the gun down!" It made Ryan sick, the gun, its deadly black muzzle, and Battles leering behind it.

"I'll put it down when you tell me what I want to know. You didn't come back because you were broke. You came back because old Dave Carson ran onto a cache just twice as big, and you thought maybe you'd get your hooks into it."

"So you're the one that's been after old Dave!"

Battles didn't answer. He sat with his lips twisted down, the gun aimed. "I'm going to count ten. You start talking. You tell me all about it. We'll see how much talking you can get done before I reach ten. If I think it's enough, you'll walk out of here alive. Otherwise—" He jiggled the gun hammer. "And don't forget to tell what it was Dave sent you down in Talaqua Bay."

"He sent me a telegram saying he didn't expect to live long, and now it's easy enough to see why."

Battles, counting slowly, reached four. "You better get to talking. *Five!*"

"I tell you—"

"What was that package he sent you? *Six!*"

"He sent me no package. If he did, I didn't receive it. I had him grubstaked on the Porcupine, and—"

"Seven!"

"Put the gun down, you damn fool! If you killed me, what then? What good would I be to you dead?"

"What good would you be alive unless you tell? If you were dead you wouldn't be running to the U.S. Marshal saying I was here. *Eight!* I'm waiting, Ryan. *Nine!*"

His finger had cocked on the trigger. The tension of his arm, telegraphing itself along the gun barrel, made a tiny tremble.

Ryan had turned hot and cold, sick and sweaty. But at *ten* the fear left him. He took a deep breath. Beyond the gun Battles' eyes had been the eyes of a killer, but he didn't fire. He jerked back his head with a laugh and said,

"You win, Ryan! You got guts, haven't you? You got more guts than I gave you credit for."

Ryan felt dizzy. His ears buzzed. Now that the danger was temporarily removed, he was hot and sweaty again. It was so hot he had a hard time getting air to breathe.

A sound at the door behind him made him gather his faculties. Battles heard it too, and spoke,

"Shorty?"

An unfamiliar, husky voice answered, "Yeah."

"Well, come in."

The door opened, admitting a small, graying man with perfect, fragile features. He seemed slightly jittery. He brought with him the whiskey smell of one who had practically lived on the stuff for weeks, months, even years.

"Well" Shorty asked, "Find anything out?"

"No, but we will. Draw your gun, Shorty, and get behind him."

Shorty carried a Colt in a halfbreed holster beneath his left armpit, hidden by his mackinaw. The holster had a spring mechanism designed to snap the gun upward when the catch was released, and Shorty almost lost it on the floor. He got it with a stab of his hand, and wheeled with it, aiming at Ryan's back. His finger was so hard on the trigger it rocked the double-acting hammer half way back.

Ryan hissed, "Be careful."

Battles laughed. He said, "Stand up! Raise your hands!"

The ceiling was low, and Ryan's fingers almost brushed it.

"What was it that Carson sent you in Telaqua?"

"How many times do I have to say—"

Battles moved suddenly. He'd lowered the gun. Now he brought it around in a raking, backhand swing.

Ryan saw it too late and tried to weave aside. The gun hit him. The forward

sight ripped him from the base of his jaw, across his cheek, the bridge of his nose.

It sent him staggering. For a second he forgot about Shorty, about the Colt aimed at his back. He caught himself after two half-steps, and, arms lowered, started toward Battles. Battles was ready for him. He brought the gun back down, and clubbed him to the floor.

Ryan had no recollection of falling. He was just there, on hands and knees. The room spun around him.

"Get up!" he heard Battles say.

He got as far as his kness. Effort made him black out. Pain was a whirlpool inside his skull, behind his eyes. He could hear Battles' voice. It beat on his eardrums, but the words didn't get through to his brain.

Battles stood in front of him, his logger boots set wide. He lifted one of the boots. Ryan saw it coming. He was like a man in a nightmare whose muscles refuse to answer to his will. He couldn't move. The boot smashed him in the temple, driving him back against the wall.

"Where did he locate it?" Battles was asking for the third or fourth time.

"Locate—what?" Ryan shouted the words, "Locate what?"

Battles hissed, "Quiet or I'll kill you. Where did he locate the Stormwind gold?"

There was a thud of feet running along the hall. He tried to get to his feet. Shorty had his back turned, propping a chair under the door knob. Ignoring the guns, Ryan lunged forward, but Battles met him and slugged him to the wall. He tried to cover up as Battles repeatedly drove his hobs to the side of his head.

II

RYAN WAS a long time coming awake. Finally he sat up. Somebody had placed a cold cloth over his face.

He said, with his tongue feeling thick, "Where am I?"

"Alaska," said Blind Tom at his elbow.

He managed to laugh. The sun was shining, just edging the horizon, coming through the smoky window pane. It hurt his eyes. His neck hurt when he turned. All his teeth ached. They didn't mesh. He'd taken beatings before and it had been like that. His lower teeth weren't built in the same contour as his uppers, and they pained him at each uncomformity.

He got out of bed, finding a handhold on the bedpost until a wave of blackness left his brain. He looked at himself in the mirror. His face was lopsided, there were several deep welts oozing blood from his left earlobe to the bridge of his nose. Both cheeks and his right temple were pocked from hobs and turning purplish.

"Now there's a case of timberjack measles for you," he said. "That's the worst I've had since Big Louie Lamotte worked me over with an ox yoke down in Aberdeen."

"Who are they?" Tom asked.

"Bill Battles and some old fellow he called Shorty." He turned from the mirror and asked, "Is Tonka without the law these days?"

"There's Krause, the U.S. Commissioner."

"You didn't call him?"

"I didn't want to until you came around. It might be some private quarrel and—"

"Sure, Tom. That's just as well. I'm developing a certain fondness for the thought of taking care of this by myself."

His room has been ransacked, warsack emptied, things trod on, kicked to corners of the room. His money was still on the table, his Smith & Wesson was on the floor. They hadn't found what they were looking for, because, whatever it was, old Dave hadn't sent it. There'd only been the telegram.

A memory of something returned. Battles had asked a question about Stormwind. He repeated the word, "Stormwind."

Blind Tom, hearing him, said, "Now *you're* out looking for the Stormwind cache are you, Ryan?"

That was it! He snapped his fingers at the memory. *The Stormwind Cache!*

Story of the cache dated back to the days of the first gold miners, before the Klondike rush. It was a legend, something that everyone talked about, and only half believed.

Four prospectors were supposed to have come down the Yukon from Circle City with a quarter-ton of gold. At that time, living in Unakitleet, was an outlaw colony

of salmon and fur pirates. A group of twenty of these scoundrels had camped on the Yukon, and seeing the prospectors' bateau, they attacked. After an all-day, floating battle the prospectors escaped on shore near the Flattail Muskegs, and under cover of the short, summer night, tried to get out of sight in the scrub timber covering the Kuskokwim divide.

The pirates, however, picked up their trail and fell on them again near the headwaters of Stormwind Creek. This time, the propectors were killed, but they had cached their gold which was never found.

That was one of the stories. There were twenty others. For instance, he'd heard that one of the men had escaped and returned later to spend his life hunting fruitlessly for the cache; that one had crawled off to die in an Indian village; that he'd escaped and died behind the bars of the B.C. provincial asylum. Ryan could even recall some gaudy headlines a few years back when a convict at Walla Walla, claiming to be Stormwind survivor, convinced a group of Seattle businessmen, who used their influence to gain his parole and subsequently took them for eight thousand dollars in a variation of the old Spanish Trunk racket.

He said, "Tom, do you think there's anything to that Stormwind story?"

The blind man laughed. "Well, maybe. But I'd rather go up to Circle and sluice my own quarter-ton of gold. It'd be easier that way."

Ryan saw no more of Battles. He stayed in town, recuperating from his beating, hoping that Dave Carson would learn he was there and show himself. When two days passed and no word of him, he went upriver to the mouth of the Comeluck, and thence up that swift silt-milky stream to Porcupine Flats. There an Aleut half-breed caught up with him, bringing the news Dave Carson's drowned body had been washed up on the rocks below Three Pillar Rapids.

He'd already been buried in the mission yard of St. Paul's five miles downstream when Ryan got there.

"I want the body exhumed," Ryan said.

His request angered the Jesuit. He stood, a big, thick-necked man, with his back to the wind and his cassock blowing around him, and said, "Nonsense, Ryan. I hate to turn a good Irishman down, but what good could it possibly do? The man was drowned. I'm not untrained at medicine, and—"

"I don't doubt your word he was drowned, but they did it. Look at my face. Look at the beating they handed me. Do you think they'd come around and work me over if they could still get to Dave? Whether they killed him or not, they at least knew he was dead when they came from me."

After some consideration, the Jesuit said, "Very well," and called to a couple of Siwash boys who were repairing the shake roof. In an hour their shovels revealed Dave in his rough board coffin.

He was dressed in the same sourdoughs, shirt and mackinaw he'd worn when he'd been washed up on the crags. Women at the mission had washed and pressed them, and put them back on him. His boots were still damp. They were heavy, ten-inch high-cuts.

Ryan pointed to them. "You see? He cracked up in no canoe. I've seen him go barefoot rather than injure a canoe with heavy heels."

Ryan searched him, felt the seams of his clothes, slitted his boot soles, taking them off a layer of leather at a time.

The Jesuit, watching him, said, "What were you looking for?"

"Just looking."

"A key?"

"Dave didn't own a lock, what would he do with a key?"

"I forgot to tell you, but there was a small, brass key inside the lining of his mackinaw. I thought it had slipped through his pocket."

Ryan sat beneath the mission's pole awning all afternoon, smoking, feeling the key in his pocket, trying to get from his mind the picture of Dave's drowned face.

Suddenly he cried, "Fort Baker! The Cudahay Company had some lock boxes there when they ran their express line. What ever happened to them?"

"Why, they're still there, if anybody wants to use them. In the store."

IT WAS twilight, and Ryan had traveled all day. With muscles heavy from

fatigue, he turned his canoe ashore and camped on a dry hummock among cottonwoods.

He built a fire, siwashed a salmon he'd bought earlier at an Indian fishwheel, and with midnight sun still hanging on the horizon, rolled up in his rabbitskin blanket to sleep.

He awoke suddenly and sat up. He didn't know what had awakened him.

The sun had slipped behind the mountain horizon for the nearest approach one had to night at that season. A luminous twilight reflected from the sky, the river.

He listened, ears straining. The river made a perpetual roar. There was a slight wind in the cottonwood branches. A coal popped in a dying fire, a whisky jack fluttered and chattered.

His hand, groping beneath the blanket, found the cold steel of the revolver. He felt better then. Holding the gun, he kicked the blanket aside, stood, and spent another three or four minutes listening.

He dressed, and circled, following the river shore for almost half a mile, looking for the impressions of feet in the mud. There was little chance anyone would approach his camp from the river, and apparently, no one had.

He laughed at himself and tried to escape the impression that someone was behind him in the timber watching each move he made. He'd traveled too hard of late. He hadn't been eating enough. He hadn't had the whisky an Irishman needed to keep him going in this country. And the sight of Dave Carson's drowned face had affected him more deeply than he thought.

Stretched in his blanket, thinking these things, he finally fell asleep. When he awoke, the first thing he noticed was a bright strand of hair, tangled in willow, blowing in the gentle breeze.

A spiderweb, he thought, knowing quite well that it wasn't. He pulled it free. It was a hair, almost black, about two feet long.

And while he stood, running the hair through his fingers, Sky-Noo's words came back —A white girl, with black hair and blue eyes.

He looked at his duffle. Nothing had been disturbed. His canoe was as it had been, bottom up on the shore. No sign of moccasin tracks. He tried to forget it, but felt someone watching, watching . . .

THERE was no town at Baker, just the ruined army barracks overlooking the river from a high shoulder of ground, the long, log trading post, and half a dozen driftwood shanties occupied by a branch of the Dogrib tribe from the hill country to the north.

It had been three years since Ryan had come down from his claim on Porcupine, so he had to spend some time renewing acquaintances with the proprietor, a huge, filthy man known as Swede Nels.

He dropped the key on the counter and said, "I think Dave left something here."

Nels said, "Yah, sure," and without hesitation started stacking aside sack after sack of dog meal to get at some old fashioned express lock boxes. "By golly, Ay almost forgot. Dave did come in har and put something away."

"When was he here?"

"Couple month ago. Maybe only sax weeks. There bane plenty snow for sled runner, Ay know that much."

"Mushed down?"

"Yah."

Nels kept trying the key in one lock after another until he found one that it fit. The lock box contained something in an old brown paper sack. Nels tossed it over to him.

"He left that old Nanuck dog of his. Sore foot. You can pick her up if you like. Charge you two dollar for feed." Nels didn't seem to attach much importance to the package. He said, "So old Dave bane dead and gone. By yimminy, that's hell."

Ryan looked at the sack. His fingers trembled a little. It wasn't like him to lose nerve. He wanted to rip the package open and see what was inside, but there was an Indian, a stranger, in the big trade room, so he checked himself.

To make an excuse he said, "I'll take a look at that malemute," and went outside.

He walked to the dog pens, opened the sack, and pulled out its contents. There was a single article—a piece of squaw beadwork. He unfolded it, a strip of soft-rubbed buckskin, looked at one side and then the other. He'd expected a message.

He could see none. He turned the sack inside out. Nothing there either.

He felt disappointed and let down. He stood by the dog pens, folding and unfolding the beaded strip, wondering if Sky-noo hadn't been right about Dave after all. This thing was a masterpiece of the beadworker's art, worth maybe twenty dollars at the curio stores down at Cook Inlet, but it was nothing a sane man would carry down from Porcupine and lock in an express box.

It seemed to be very old. The buckskin had almost lost its Injun-smoke odor, it was browned, and turned rather crystalline from age. Apparently it had never been worn. It was a belt, or a collarpiece, about as long as his arm, four inches wide in the center and tapering to half that width at ends which were fitted with tie strings of pliant caribou tendon. The front was a solid mass of beads, a pale blue background worked with figures symbolical of men, animals, canoes, trees and igloos in red, purple and orange.

Finally he rolled it up and thrust it in his pocket. That last winter of loneliness had done it. Dave had gone crazy trying to find the long end of a square quilt, as the saying went.

Ryan sat at Swede Nel's big, roughboard table, eating lutefisk and drinking home brew. The Swede was half drunk, as he'd been off and on for two days. In the background, moving quietly, keeping more home brew ready, was Nel's wife, a full-blood Aleut from Kulakak Bay.

For what must have been an hour, with no pause except to pour more home brew down his throat, Nels had recounted his adventures in the harvest fields of "Noord Dakota." Then, while taking apart Fargo board for board, he forgot his story and got to bellowing the interminable verses of a song, each alternate stanza of which ended in the words,

"Yah, yah! Vat skal ve ha?
Olga on a buggyride, Yah, yah, yah!"

Ryan finally got up and went outside. It still frosted each night, and the cold felt good to him. He didn't want to stay there any longer, but he didn't know which way to turn.

The piece of beadwork made a lump in his hip pocket. For the twentieth time that day he took it out to examine it. The sun had set, but enough light remained in the sky for him to make out the intricate bead tracings.

He kept walking, paying little attention to his destination until he was stopped by a heap of fence rails near the malemute pens. One old gray and tan, with his forepaws on the wire, high as a man's head, was barking with his fangs peeled back.

It surprised Ryan, for the malemute had seen him enough to grow used to him.

Suddenly he realized that there was someone else, moving, in the shadow behind him.

He turned with his hand dropping instinctively to the Smith & Wesson. Then he saw the gleam of a gun barrel aimed at him, and a girl's voice spoke:

"Don't try anything. Don't try to call. I have a gun aimed at your heart. I wouldn't hesitate to shoot."

He recovered himself enough to laugh, but not enough to put his heart behind it. "I'll wager you wouldn't, girl. And what do I have that you could want?"

"That thing in your hand."

"This?"

"Yes. The girdle. I'll take it."

Her words hit him like a blow between the eyes. He'd been a fool. His mind had been on the girdles he'd seen pictured in catalogues, but this Indian belt could be a girdle too.

"Give it to me!" she hissed.

"Why, sure girl." He turned with it, holding it at arm's length, hoping she would step forward to take it. She wasn't tempted. She stood crouched forward, intent, like a spring drawn and triggered.

"Bring it here!"

He moved slowly, and with a change of position he had a better view of her.

She was a slim girl, no more than an inch or so over five feet. She had small, excellently cut features. No Indian blood. Her skin, for that country, was very light. She was dressed in high moccasins. White wool sox folded down below the knees gave her calves a stocky appearance. She wore a buckskin skirt and jacket. On her head was a mackinaw wool cap. Her dark

hair had been plaited and wrapped in a coil, but it was too luxuriant to remain hidden, and the cap gave the appearance of perching atop of it. Her eyes might have been blue, but in the half light they seemed black.

SHE WAS excited and fighting to keep the excitement down. Ryan could tell that by her rapid breathing, by the way she kept biting down on her lip.

"Girl," he said, "you're welcome to the thing. But tell me, what are you doing, a girl like you, traveling with the kind you are? What would a young girl like you be doing with robbery and murder?"

She cried with sudden, angry defense, "I have nothing to do with murder!"

"Then you wouldn't pull the trigger?"

"Toss it here!"

The gun was clenched too tightly, her finger too hard on the trigger. He didn't want to push his luck.

"All right, catch it."

He tossed the rolled-up squaw girdle, intentionally a trifle to her right. She might try to reach and catch it, and in that case the gun might be turned for a second, giving him his chance. She didn't move. It struck the ground behind her, a yard or more to her right.

She did not change hands with the gun. She didn't try to bend and reach around with her left. She backed, with the gun still aimed, came around it until it was in front of her, then she crouched and picked it up.

He said, "It's a small thing, the girdle, but still it's robbery at gunpoint. There is nothing for me to do now except get the United States marshal and run you down."

She laughed at him and tossed her head back. "You're not scaring me! What United States marshal would hunt down a girl for taking such a thing?"

It was true. He'd be laughed out of Alaska.

She backed around until she was on the river side. The malemute had stopped barking, and now he started again. There was a gate to the dog pens, held on the outside by a prop-pole. With heel he felt the prop pole behind him, and was tempted to drop the gate and let the dog loose on her. The animal, savage as he sounded, wouldn't actually attack her, but he'd get her turned away with the gun.

Ryan hesitated, and took his foot away. Capturing her would do no good. He couldn't keep her prisoner, he couldn't turn her over to the law.

She shouted to be heard over the dog frenzy. "Don't move! I can see you all the way from the river. I'll shoot if you try to follow me."

She moved backward, over hummocky moss and stones. A canoe had been pulled in to shore among some flooded willows. At fifty yards, she turned, and watching back across her shoulder, ran to it. Ryan could have drawn, and with the .38, blasted the canoe bottom out.

Now, thinking clearly for the first time in days, he knew it would do him no good to get the girdle back. He had no idea what value it had. It would be better to let her have it, and follow her. That would be the tough part, following her, not letting her get away along those trackless rivers of the North.

He watched her slide the canoe from the willows, leap in, and crouching drive the paddle with sharp strength and skill that sent the craft, light as bubble, into the current, holding a level course across and downstream.

He ran to the trading house. Swede Nels, beating the table with his fists, was belowing out another ballad.

Ryan threw his duffle together and was outside in a quarter minute. The canoe was a shadow strip near the far bank. He launched his own canoe, then, not wanting her to know she was being followed, he waited for what seemed to be a long time as she approached the downstream bend.

III

FOR THE first few miles it was quite dark, with a few stars out, then the sun edged upward, spreading a rose colored dawn over the water. The girl was far ahead. Driftlogs made it impossible to spot her canoe, but occassionally his eyes caught the sun-flash of her paddle.

He kept catching brief glimpses of her until it was noon, and he'd passed the mouth of the Hsluika, a swift, treacherous stream flowing down from the hill country

to the north.

Beaching his canoe, he climbed a promontory and looked both ways along miles of river flowing between great, barren banks. To the south, the country rolled away in vast undulations toward the Ahklun Mountains, to the north lay the sharply dissected pine and rock country of Porcupine Ridge and the Stormwinds.

No sign of the canoe. Thought that she had pulled up to rest along one of the cottonwood studded banks made him wait, rolling and smoking one cigarette after another, fighting down a natural impatience.

No sign of her. She had turned off at the Hsluika.

Ryan was a good man with a canoe, taller than he looked, with a strength that gave him a long-reaching power on the paddle, but still the booming stream repeatedly fought him to a standstill. He was forced to use a pikepole; he went ahead with the babiche line, towing it past riffles and rapids, wading waist deep in the icy flood.

Through wet-slick moccasins the rocks of the river bruised his feet. His body ached from the cold water. He kept driving on and on, expecting her around each sharp turn of the canyon walls, but she was never there. At last, with the sun at the jagged horizon, he fell face down among the rocks on shore and rested.

He was protected from the wind that blew a chilling blast on his wet clothes, but after half an hour he was forced to get up and rub circuation into his muscles. He ate half of the smoked salmon he'd brought along, put the rest away for next day, and went on.

He kept cursing through his teeth. He was a fool. He should turn back. The girl had tricked him. No girl could battle this Hsluika and keep ahead of him. She'd hidden on shore, watched him go past, and now she was gone, swallowed by the vastness of the North.

He pulled ashore, climbed a steep shoulder of rock from which he could see stretches of the river for several miles.

He glimpsed it there, the canoe, riding with corklike buoyancy, while the girl, maneuvering it this way and that, utlilized every crosscurrent to move upstream, skirting crags by the merest breath, finding clearance along shore where Ryan, with his greater weight, would force a canoe down and rip its bottom out.

Tired as he was, he laughed and shook his head. By the great gods of the North, how she could handle a canoe!

Darkness in the canyon made him stop. He built a fire, dried himself, and slept for a couple of hours.

He ate. He had enough food left for one meal. Wind carried an odor of woodsmoke. Two hours later he found the drenched embers of a fire under a sheltering bank. He placed his hand on them. The charcoal was cold, the rocks beneath barely warm. She'd been gone more than an hour.

He no longer kept track of time. He fought the river until fatigue drugged him. He fell on the bank to rest, and then fought it some more. It came night, he ate the last of his food. His blanket was watersoaked. He sat between a fire and the reflecting face of a cliff, dozing, jerking awake to listen to the close howling of wolves.

At midmorning, in the narrowing canyon, he found a series of steplike waterfalls blocking his way.

There again he saw the blackened embers of the fire. He looked at them with fatigue-dulled eyes, and suddenly jerked erect as he saw a thin veil of steam rising from them. They had been drenched only a few minutes before.

He crouched with misty cold spray of the cascades drifting over him and looked around. She'd seen him approaching. She might be waiting behind rocks or scrub spruce just above, gun ready.

No sign of her canoe. She'd cached it downstream, and come on afoot.

There was a portage trail along cliffs and rock banks to the right. A steep trail, a switchback trail, a mountain goat trail.

Working swiftly, he made a wolf pack of rifle, ammunition, blanket and extra clothing. It seemed like nothing after portaging the canoe.

He climbed. The footpath made a series of close switchbacks until it gained an elevation somewhat higher than the crest of the cataracts, then it followed a contour of the side. It still wasn't an easy trail. A man had to watch for footing, steplike up and down, often with footholds barely wider than his outspread

hand, with the river vertically below, churning itself to a white froth.

A bullet pinged against rock and screamed away with a clap of explosion following it.

Instinctively he went to one knee. He found partial protection behind a bulge of stone. His hand went over his shoulder, pulling the rifle free of his pack.

Two hundred yards away, beyond a jagged rock shoulder, a puff of powder smoke had appeared.

There was a second squirt of smoke. The bullet hit an instant later. Above him, so close it showered him with stinging bits of rock and left an odor like burned sulphur.

He tossed the rifle to his shoulder, aimed high of her position, pulled the trigger. It was a .35 Winchester, a moose gun, a grizzly gun. Its 250 grain slug kicked a shower of rock and spruce litter about three feet above her head. It made her flinch so her third shot was far wide.

He fired once more, aiming at the same spot, then he lunged to his feet, was exposed for three perilous steps along the cliff, and with a leaping dive, found cover in a narrow crevice, filled with twisted spruce roots and wedged-in slide rock.

He half stood, half lay on his side, boots anchored, and got his breath. There was just room in the crevice to hide him. He could feel both its walls when he breathed. Bullets screamed down, struck repeatedly within a foot of his head, showering him with stone as they glanced away.

He laughed. "Ryan," he said, "what a woman you picked!"

He rolled a cigarette of sodden paper, with sodden tobacco. The cover of his match can had worked loose, and the matches were crumbly from dampness.

He cursed, tore the cigarette open, chewed the tobacco like snooce beneath his lip.

The shooting stopped, but still he didn't show himself. Carefully feeling for each foothold, he climbed, using the crevice for protection until he reached the fringe of spruce timber high on the mountain side of the canyon.

He glimpsed her then, a mile away, traveling swiftly through the big timber of the bottoms.

RYAN STAYED with the high country and kept her in sight, watching her leave false trail, double back, hunt the rocky going, then leave false trail again.

Yes, Ryan, there was a *woman*. Clever as a cross fox.

She left the valley, crossed the narrow ridge of Hsluika Divide.

Beyond Hsluika a wild pattern of gulches fanned into muskeg which still held the frost of winter a few inches beneath the surface.

He bound the driftwood trunks of cottonwoods together and crossed a currentless stream. Here again was hill country covered by jacktimber.

He caught an odor of woodsmoke. Trails laced the hillsides. The benches and bottoms were pockmarked by old placer diggings.

These, he knew, were the old Mucker diggings, discovered back in 1902 by men moving through Alaska from the Klondike diggings. Now Mucker was an outlaw town, reputedly the home of half the sluice robbers and fur thieves of the Yukon.

From high along a ridge he looked down on the town.

It had once boasted more than a hundred houses, but now all except seventeen or eighteen lay in ruins, or had disappeared using only their sill logs to show where they had stood. One, a long, narrow building had the appearance of a trading post. There was a creek which joined a river about two miles below town. It was the same river he'd crossed earlier that day, only larger now, swifter. At one time there'd been another settlement there, but now all that remained was a ramshackle boathouse. The only movement he saw was a man over there, puttering around an upended canoe.

Twilight settled as he descended, hunting concealment among the bench diggings. He stopped behind a dog shed about fifty steps from the long, log building.

The odor of food struck his nostrils, and left him momentarily weak.

He dropped his pack and rifle. Malemutes were barking at him, but he paid no attention. He crossed to the house, stopped outside, listened. Men's voices came from the deep interior.

Candlelight shone amber through some

parchment windows. He started around to listen, but a man was coming, and he quickly concealed himself in the shadow of a storm shed that was built against the back door.

The man was familiar. Bill Battles!

Hatred made him start forward, but he checked himself. Now wasn't the time.

Battles went past so close Ryan could smell the tobacco smoke that clung to his clothes, and disappeared inside the house.

Ryan waited. He was sure Battles had gone on to the distant, lighted room. Through the open storm shed door he could dimly see a kitchen, the teeth of ruddy light glowing through the open draft of a cookstove.

He walked in. He could hear Battles' voice, and her voice. He knew she'd come there, but it made him curse anyway. She was so young and pretty—he didn't like the thought of her coming to Battles.

He wolfed some left-over pancakes. A big, iron pot of squaw mulligan bubbled on the stove. He dipped some in a tinplate, ate, spearing huge chunks of caribou with his hunting knife.

With the edge off his hunger, he paid attention to the voices.

Battles seemed to be in high humor, saying, "I'd liked to have seen his ugly Irish face when you took it."

He could hear the whisky-hoarse voice of Shorty, and the girl was laughing. She seemed to be slightly hysterical. Hunger and fatigue had left her that way.

"Len," Battles said. "You'd better have a little more to eat. You wait. I'll get it for you."

That was her name, *Len.*

Ryan put his dipper of stew aside and stood with his shoulders high, his fists doubled. It would be a pleasure to smash Battles' teeth down his throat when he walked through the door. Then reluctantly he decided to stay quiet. There was no use of kicking things over now just when he was on the verge of learning what he wanted to know.

He hunkered behind the table as Battles walked in. The man was so close he could have thrust a leg beneath the table and touched him. His back was turned. He took a lid off the stove for illumination. Firelight struck him strongly, turning his face to yellowish copper, bringing out its hard lines, the long jaw, the small mouth.

He filled a dish and without once looking toward Ryan, went out, leaving the damp wool and tobacco odor of his clothes behind.

It went against Ryan's nature to hide. He stood up, cursing him, stabbing chunks of meat with his hunting knife, carrying them to his mouth. Finished, he listened.

Shorty said something about beadwork, and he knew they were examining the girdle. He stood close to the door, but only stray groups of words reached him.

He could hear from the intervening room, but it was too light, and it offered no place for concealment. He considered going outside, lisetening with an ear to the parchment window, but he gave that up, too.

His roving eyes fell on a four-rung, pole ladder that had been nailed to the kitchen's inner wall. It led to a small loft between the rafters and the roof poles.

He climbed, crawled over some bundled mildewed hides, and stopped on one knee to get dust and cobwebs out of his mouth and nasal passages.

There wasn't room for a man to stand upright. Even on one knee, his head was bent against the ceiling. It was so warm that sweat rolled off him. Six poles had been laid side by side down the middle, across the rafters. Heavy, gray building paper had been tacked on the undersides of the rafters to form a ceiling, but it had been punctured here and there, and shafts of light from the candle gave a fair illumination.

He edged forward, stopping when the voices lowered, starting against when they were raised, or when someone laughed. It had been a long time since the footpoles had supported anyone. One of them settled with a slight thud. He remained very still. The voices had stopped. Dust rose in a cloud. He wanted to sneeze and cough. He set his teeth, held his breath. Tears streamed from his eyes. They were talking again now.

For the moment he gave up trying to get closer. He lay on his stomach and listened.

THE GIRL had called someone "Uncle Mal." It was Shorty's whisky hoarse voice that answered her. He should have guessed before that they were related.

They had the same broad foreheads, the same sharply cut features.

"He'd want it that way," Shorty was saying. "You can't worry about such things. When you fight a wolf's fight, you have to use a wolf's weapons. Anyhow, nothing will come of it. We'll register this as newly mined gold, and who is there to prove that it isn't?"

Battles laughed, saying, "Well, we're going to dig it out of the ground. Isn't that mining it?"

She said, "You sound as though we had it already."

"We're closer than you think." There was a pause. Battles had looked at his watch. Ryan could hear the snap as he closed the case. "It's been better than an hour. That breed should have been here ten minutes ago."

She asked, "Where was he?"

"At the Siwash camp. Drunk again."

"Where do they get the liquor to stay drunk all the time?"

"Make it out of the spuds old Hakteel raised."

Shorty said, "I could use a few drops myself."

"Uncle!"

He cried, "Damn it, quit ragging me! Who are you to be bossing me around?" She didn't answer, so he said, "Anyhow, I'm only taking a drop. I said I was cutting down, and I am. A man can't just cut himself off like that."

Ryan could hear the squeak of a cork, the sound of little movements. Several minutes passed. Finally Battles said:

"I think I could decipher this myself if I had the time." He was evidently examining the girdle. Ryan wanted to creep a trifle further but he didn't. He lay still. "You see that, Len? That's the Siwash figure for nas-gin-ax-gan—three men. And those marks indicate the time of day. That's ga-gan or the sun, those indicate the length of shadows, and that the day of the year. I've decided that's how the old squaw established her direction to the cache—through sunset on a certain day of the year."

She said, "The day the gold was buried?"

"I suppose."

"What day was it? I mean, what time of year?"

"Late July, I'd imagine, or August. That's just a guess, but their placer muck wouldn't thaw up in Circle until mid-June, and it would take them anyhow three weeks to sluice it and clean up. Then they'd have to paddle all this distance down the Yukon. Don't worry, Len. We'll figure this out." Something told Ryan that he'd laid his hand on the girl's arm. "Sure. We'll have it out of the ground and be on our way to Seattle before snow flies. Seattle, Len! I'm going to enjoy showing you that town. Then San Francisco, Los Angeles, maybe the East Coast. There's no limit what we can do with that kind of money!"

The pieces all fit. According to the most commonly told story, the four prospectors had been attacked near the headwaters of Stormwind Creek. Three had been killed while a fourth escaped, wounded, to a Siwash village. Ryan could put the rest together. A squaw had hidden the wounded man from his pursuers, and he'd died there after giving her the location of the cache. Squaw-fashion, this information had been worked in the bead pattern of the girdle.

And finally Dave had got hold of it! He grinned and thought, The old philanderer! He'd heard many tales dating to Dave's younger days telling of his prowess among the squaws.

He lay, listened to them talk of small things, move impatiently, walk repeatedly to the door to watch for the breed's arrival.

"There he is now," Battles said.

Two men in moccasins, by the sound. Someone spoke a low word or two in an Indian tongue. They walked through, and Battles spoke, calling them "Steve," and "Hakteel."

"Ha, yes!" the one called Steve cried out. "Here, let me look at it. Yes, that is it. I have seen it hanging on the medicine stick in my mother's wickiup ten hundred times, and she would never let me touch it, I didn't know why. This is it, then. See, Hakteel? What you think of beadwork? Ol' mama damn good, no?"

There was quiet. Evidently Hakteel had the girdle and was trying to decipher it.

"Ked-jin-qua," he said over a couple of times.

Battles asked, "What does he mean?"

"A hundred," the breed answered.

"A hundred what?"

Hakteel muttered, "No savvy. Very

hard savvy. You give drink whisky maybe Hakteel savvy."

Battles laughed, said, "I should break your neck," but there was a squeak of the cork, and Hakteel's cough and inhalation after the drink.

"You see? Sharp mountain. You know sharp mountain?"

"Which direction from Stormwind?"

"Like-so. Look. Like so."

Ryan could tell nothing from the conversation. He rose on hands and knees, slid forward little by little. There was a tear in the building paper about four feet distant. Finally he reached it, bent his head far down between the rafters, and he could see them below. They were hunched over the table, Hakteel an old, ragged Siwash pointing to some feature of the beadwork with a fingernail that looked white as a bit of clam shell on the end of his filthy, black finger; Steve, a tall, lean halfbreed of thirty with a deeply scarred right cheek and little pewter rings in his ears, Battles on the other side of the table with Shorty trying to see over his shoulder. He couldn't see the girl.

They kept talking, with Hakteel explaining things in the Tlingit jargon.

Suddenly he noticed that Shorty was looking directly up at him.

He checked the impulse to draw back. He remained as he was, not making the silghtest move. It seemed that more than a minute passed, then Shorty turned suddenly and rubbed his forehead as though it pained him.

Ryan slid back. He didn't want to be cornered there. From below, he could hear Battles coughing. He realized that his movement had started dust to sifting through the air.

"What the hell?" wheezed Battles.

Steve said, "You need a drink. All of us need a drink. How about it, Shorty, you need a drink?"

Ryan stood in a crouch, climbed over the bundles of pelts, located the top rung of the ladder, descended to the kitchen.

He glanced around. The kitchen seemed to be empty. He moved past the table with long strides, through the storm shed, and took a deep breath of the cold, outside air.

"Don't move!" said the girl's voice behind him.

IV

HE STOOD stiffly erect. By tilting his head back slightly, he was able to see her moving from shadow at the rear of the shed. Night twilight, coming through the slight mist, gleamed on the gun in her hand.

"So you got here!" he said.

He managed to laugh. "You were the clever one with all that backtrailing, but I had a balcony seat to it all."

"What do you mean?"

"I was at timberline on the ridge, watching every step you took."

"Maybe you were too clever!"

"Now, what do you mean by that?" He looked at the gun. "Oh, I see. You mean your friends will kill me like they did poor Dave Carson."

He remembered her sharp reaction to the charge of murder at Baker. It had a similar effect now.

"We never killed him."

"Oh, but you did. They did."

"What proof do you have?"

"His body showed up drowned in the river below Three Pillars. Drowned with hobnails on. Dave would never use hobs in a canoe."

Her lips curled. "What proof is that?"

"They killed him, girl. It's true as I'm standing here, they killed him. Then they came for me. They were after the girdle. They were waiting in the dark at my room in Blind Tom's Hotel. Look at my face. See the marks on it. See where Battles beat me while that man they call Shorty held a gun in my back."

"You're lying!"

"No, I am not lying. Look me in the eye and say what kind of men you have joined up with."

Her teeth were clenched. She was listening. Men were talking. Unfamiliar voices coming toward the front of the house. Others in that outlaw valley were probably in on the plot. And there was another sound—a man coming heavily through the house.

With a tightening of his muscles, Ryan realized it was Battles.

"Get back!" she whispered.

He moved into the shadow, but not so far but what he could see Battles in the door. Battles hesitated and said:

"Oh, it's you, Len. I thought I heard

something. Why the gun?"

"You surprised me." She put it away.

"This thing's got you jumpy. There's nothing to worry about now. Nobody would come here. Not even a fool like Ryan. You better go back to the cabin and get some rest."

"All right."

"I'll see you later," he said, and turned away.

She called to him, "Bill, will you tell Uncle Mal to come right over? I want to talk with him."

"I'll keep him away from the bottle if that's—"

"Send him over."

She'd drawn the gun again, and Ryan laughed at her. "You're being foolish. There was nothing to stop me drawing on you a moment ago."

She stood with it aimed for a few seconds, then with a nervous movement she stabbed it back in the holster.

"All right. Maybe you want to come to the cabin with me. Maybe you want to accuse him of it face to face."

"Sure. We'll do it any way you like. And we'll get the truth of it, and what then?"

She walked beside him without answering. He knew that she hadn't decided herself.

THE CABIN was dark save for a slight glow that came from a low-burned fire in the stove.

They went in together, she closed the door. He could hear her moving around, blanketing a window. Then she lighted a candle from the stove.

It had been twilight when he faced her before, this was his first good look at her.

She seemed even prettier. Smaller. Her hair, escaping the cap, fell in thick coils over her shoulders. Candlelight raised a play of color from the strands. It was dark brown but not black. Her eyes were blue, unusually dark, a midnight shade. Excitement had brought a slight flush to her cheeks. Her lips were parted. She kept touching her tongue to them, biting her lower lip with her small, white teeth. Her buckskin skirt was cinched more tightly, it revealed her slim waist, accentuated the soft curves of her body.

She said, "We might as well sit down. He might not even come. He hates me because of the liquor. He ought to know I do it for his own good."

"We drinking men are that way," Ryan said cheerfully, and grinned showing his two gold teeth. He spoke her name. "Len? Is that it?"

"You were up there eaves-dropping?"

He looked at the dust-coated front of his mackinaw and pants. "I'm in no condition to deny it."

"What did you hear?"

"I heard that your name was Len. Len what?"

"Len Darrel."

It surprised him that she'd answered. "I've heard of no white girl being at Mucker. Where did you come from?"

"Don't try to find out any more. It'll do you no good."

A man's boots thudded the planks outside and she got quickly to her feet.

"Uncle Mal?"

"Yes."

"Come in."

He opened the door, came in, started to close it behind him. Then he saw Ryan. He blinked a few times. He'd had too much to drink; he'd had too much to drink every day for months, and it had deadened his reflexes.

"Close the door!" she said sharply.

Ryan knew by the dart of the man's eyes that he was afraid of the girl.

He said, "You, Ryan! What the hell are you—" He checked himself. Ryan guessed why. He didn't want Len to know they'd ever met.

She said, "How'd you happen to know who he was?"

"I guessed. After you told about him chasing you—"

"And after all that you thought it would be natural he'd be here in the cabin with me? Tell me the truth! You met before?" She waited for him to answer. "Did you? Did you meet him before?"

He seemed to be baffled. He weaved his head from side to side.

She said, "You waited in the hotel room at Moyukuk and tortured him."

He kept shaking his head. He was afraid of the girl. Ryan had seen fear like his in the eyes of a trapped wolf. A fear mixed with hatred.

She cried, "How did the old pros-

pector die? You went to Porcupine and followed him down to the rapids, didn't you? You found him camped there. You killed him."

"No! Damn it, quit shouting at me. I ain't going to take it any longer—"

She reached and grabbed a coiled dog whip from a peg on the wall. He started back as the lash snaked across the room and came to a stop with a crack like a rifle shot.

He tossed both hands up. There was a stool back of his legs. It tripped him. He sprawled to the floor, hands in front of his face.

"Lie to me?" She was a master with the lash. It cracked above his head so closely it riffled his hair. It terrified him without striking him.

He whimpered, "I'll tell you the truth. Yes, we waited for him in the hotel room. Battles and me. It wasn't my doing, thought. It was Battles. I couldn't—"

"How about the prospector?"

He crawled off, shaking his head, got half way to his feet, back braced against the log wall. He twisted aside as the lash came once more, powdering a bit of mud chinking near his cheek.

"We followed him down to the rapids. He was camped there. Battles said we'd talk to him. Them was his words. I didn't know what he had on his mind. I didn't know he intended to scorch it out of him."

"You mean you tortured him?"

"He was going to. Battles. He was going to make him tell where the girdle was. *He can make it easy or tough on himself,* those were Battles' words. Listen, Len, I tried to get him not to. I said it wasn't like a white man to treat another white man like that. Beaates threatened to serve me the same way. So I sneaked around and cut him loose. But it was a mistake. Carson made a run for it and Battles hit him with a pikepole. We tried to bring him to, but it wasn't any use, so we put him in his canoe and turned him loose in the rapids. We didn't think he'd be found. Anyhow we didn't think they'd guess but what he got swamped trying the shoot the rapids."

She looked at her uncle as though she hated him. With her lips drawn to a tight line she said, "You bushwhacker!"

"It wasn't my fault." The experience had left him so weak and shaky he could barely stand. "I got to have a drink."

She turned her back, and he found the whisky bottle, took a huge drink, and stood shuddering like a man getting chill out of his body. He kept looking at her. His weren't the eyes of a whipped dog. They were the eyes of a whipped wolf, filled with craftiness and hatred.

He whispered, "Don't let Battles know I told you. He'd kill me, Len. He'd—"

"I won't tell him."

She hung the dog whip back on its peg. She drew her revolver, a .32 Colt, put it back again. She opened a drawer, got out a box of fifty cartridges, dropped them in her jacket pocket.

Her uncle kept looking back and forth between her and Ryan. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." She motioned, indicating the other room of the cabin—a bedroom, evidently her own. "Stay in there."

He went in and closed the door. Ryan could hear the creak of a bunk as he lay down.

"She said, "All right!" to Ryan, and he followed her outside.

SHE HAD stopped him with a press of her shoulder, and he stood looking down at her. It gave him a strange, almost giddy feeling to have her so close. Her shoulder, under the buckskin, seemed to be very frail and soft. He could feel the small movement of her body.

She said, looking up at him, "The girdle is mine, you know!"

"Tell me about it."

"My father bought it. From that halfbreed."

"From Steve?"

"Yes. His mother made it. It was a guide to lead him to the Stormwind Cache. But probably you knew all that."

"I'm finding things out. How did she know about the cache?"

"There was one survivor. His name was Regan or Rogan. He crawled there, to Chatna village, and she hid him. He remained there for several years, a cripple, sick most of the time. Finally he died, but he told how to find the cache, and she wove it into the girdle intending to give the secret to their son."

"She had a son by Rogan?"

"That halfbreed is their son. Steve."

"Well, what happened? What stopped him from getting it?"

"He was a troublemaker. They drove him away from the village when he was only twelve or thirteen. He wandered the gold camps. He was in jail for robbery at Sitka, and he killed another halfbreed at Nome. He didn't know about the treasure until after his mother died and old Hakteel told him. At that time he was at Pavel Mission where my father was a fur trader. He owed my father better than seven hundred dollars. One day Battles and my uncle came around and talked my father into buying a two-thirds interest on the girdle for that seven hundred and a thousand besides.

"That was last autumn. My dad was sick. He'd been sick off and on for years. He signed his interest in the girdle over to me before he died. I didn't know which way to turn. I knew I couldn't run down the cache by myself. So my uncle and Battles came with me on shares. I guess you know the rest. When we reached Chatna village the girdle was gone. He'd taken it. Your partner."

"There's one thing you've forgotten. She never did give it to her son. Maybe she did give it to Dave."

"You have no proof of that! She made it for her—"

"Girl!" He took her by the shoulders and lifted her toes off the ground while turning her so she faced him. "There's no point in us arguing about it. The point is that neither of us has the girdle. It's in the hands of a killer, as you know. Let's face the real fact. According to the law of the North it belongs to nobody and everybody. The treasure belongs to the one who finds it."

She didn't try to escape from his grasp. She seemed to be glad he was there. She was tired of fighting the lone fight. She needed someone to lean against. Ryan liked to think that. He liked the press of her young body against him, he liked the slight, siding movements of her smooth skin under the buckskin blouse as she breathed.

Finally, with firm shove of her hands, she pushed away. "We can't delay. I don't know what my uncle will do. If we get the thing, we'll have to get it now."

"Sure, girl."

He drew his .38, broke it, checked on the loads, snapped it shut again. Two hundred yards away, distorted by the night mist, he could see the glowing, parchment windows of the long, log house.

"I'll go down and get it, girl."

"No. You wouldn't have a chance. Dunhill and Williams are probably there. Both of them are dangerous. Dunhill killed a man once over at Shaktolik."

He was reluctant, unconvinced. "How do you intend to get it?"

She smiled a trifle and said, "I got it from you after Battles failed."

They walked together, and stopped at the rear of the house. A mutter of voices came from inside. They could hear Battles and the loud, obscene bellowing laugh of Steve.

She said, "Nulato Bob is there too."

"Who's he?"

"A quarterbreed. A boat builder." She smiled up at him and whispered, "He built that canoe you couldn't catch." Then, moving inside the storm shed. "You'll wait there?"

"For how long? There's less than an hour of darkness left."

"If I'm that long, go back to the house. Keep your eye on uncle. See to it he stays there."

Her uncle had a gun. Ryan wondered what he'd do if the man decided to use it. He didn't want to kill him—not her uncle.

He rolled a cigarette of damp paper and tobacco, felt by habit for his match can. The matches were crumbly, and he didn't dare light one anyway. He dry smoked and waited.

V

THE NIGHT was very quiet. Malemutes kept moving around inside the wire pens, but they were used to his scent now, and they didn't create a commotion. From a great distance across the benches, someone was playing a concertina.

The tune momentarily reminded him of Nels Jonsrud's song, and he sang the words under his breath,

"Yah, yah, vat skal ve ha?
Olga on a buggyride, yah, yah, yah."

Len! There was a girl for a buggyride.

He kept hearing their voices from inside. Len only had a few words to say.

Usually it was Battles or the breed. It was especially easy to hear the breed. Sometimes whole sentences came through.

There was a slight sound from the night behind him, and Ryan spun, whipping the gun out with a reflex movement of his hand.

He could see no one. It had been a packrat, a night bird, or just his over-taut nerves. He was too much on edge. He'd traveled too long without sleep.

He put the gun away. Then he heard it again. This time he had no doubt. It had been a man, the light whisper of moccasins across the ground.

He circled the building. He had a glimpse of someone just disappearing around the front corner. It was her uncle.

He ran, covering the distance with long, silent strides. The man wasn't there. He'd already gone through the front door.

He felt slightly sick. He wondered what the man had on his mind. He hated and feared his niece, but with Battles there he'd fear her no longer.

He was undecided. He stood by the door, listened. There was light around it. No one in that front room. He pulled the babiche latch string, lifted the door to keep it from scraping, opened it three or four inches.

Now he could hear them, Shorty, Battles and the girl. Their voices were upraised. The breed shouted something, and the girl cried, "Stand back!"

There was a scramble, a crash of overturning furniture, and the light went out.

Ryan ran through the front room, found a second door, went through it.

The struggle was all around him. A shot laced the blackness with flaming powder. The girl screamed. He knew it was she who had fired, that someone was trying to hold her.

The gun crashed again, again.

"Len!" he cried. "Len!"

A gun exploded in his face. It left him deaf. He'd lost his sense of direction. He resisted the impulse to fire. He kept going, trod over someone who was just getting to his feet.

He caught the scent of sweat and Indian-tanned buckskin. The man grappled with him, and Ryan smashed him down.

He kept going, saying, "Len! Where are you, Len?"

She hadn't answered him. She was no longer there. She'd had a gun; she'd shot her way out. She'd be looking for him at the rear door. He was a fool. He should have stayed there like he'd agreed.

Men were in front of him. He heard the breed shout, "It's him! It's the Irishman."

He charged, swinging the gun, hurling men from his way. He found the door. He knew his way now. There was an intervening room, then the kitchen.

Men were on his heels. He flung the kitchen door shut, grabbled the table, hurled it against the door. It stopped them for a couple of seconds. The stove was there, at his right. He overturned it. It smashed down across the table, spilling fire. It put them in retreat.

Outside, he stopped. "Len!"

She didn't answer him. He skirted the storm shed, shouting, "Len, Len! where are you?"

A short, heavy set man was on the run around the house. He drew up, bellowed, "There he is!" and lifting the carbine rifle in his hands, fired.

Ryan had pivoted, dived to one side. He felt the wind-whip of lead past his shoulder. His .38 answered in the same fraction of time. The bullet hit. It smashed the heavyset man backward. He dropped his rifle. He reeled for three steps with both arms wrapped around his middle, then he caught himself and took a step forward over crumpling knees and fell face forward to the ground.

Ryan saw it in a glance as he returned gunfire from another direction. He kept firing, moving along in the shadow of the pole eave. His gun clicked empty.

HE RAN across open ground with bullets from two directions churning the dirt back of his heels, reached the placer trench, dived face foremost into its protection.

He reloaded the gun, untangled himself from brush, moved in a direction that would bring him closer to the dog pens.

His rifle was back there. He wanted to get it.

Men were coming around in two directions, trying to pin him down, but the .38 reached out well, and none of them risked suicide by getting close.

The house was in flames now. Light

from the fire, and light from approaching sunrise made them still more wary.

No bullet had been close for five minutes now. Ryan risked showing himself. He walked to the rear of the dog sheds, found his bedroll and rifle.

He cupped his hands and called, "Len!" knowing he'd get no answer.

He'd seen nothing of her. Heard nothing of her since those shots in the house.

Flames was rolling both ways through the house now, and a thought occurred to him that made him sick. She wasn't in there. She'd gotten out. He kept telling himself that she'd gotten out.

The fight had left him groggy. He didn't know which way to turn. It was quite light now. The rising sun made a rusty-yellow flare on the horizon. He walked across to her cabin.

No one was there. His eyes roved the town. Everything seemed to be peaceful. Smoke rose from a couple of cabin chimneys.

He started toward the nearest house. He should have expected to be met with gunfire. He didn't. The night just passed seemed like a bad dream.

He could see a man, crouched over, watching his approach through an open window. When he reached the door, the man had moved back and picked up a gun.

"Put it down," Ryan said. "I have no fight with you."

He walked in and sat down. The man's squaw was frying pancakes. Ryan helped himself to a plateful and started to eat.

The man, a short, dirty, middle-aged fellow, laughed and put the rifle down. "You sure got your guts."

He asked around a mouth filled with pancakes, "Where'd he go? Battles?"

"How in hell would I know? I don't keep track of Battles."

"Where's the girl."

"I don't keep track of her, neither." He looked over at his ugly Siwash squaw. "Not that I'd mind the job."

"You might as well tell me."

"Or what?" He picked up the gun again. "You got some ideas of getting rough?"

"I seen enough rough stuff for one day."

"You in on all that shooting?"

"I was sort of on the edge of it."

"You the one that killed Dunhill?"

"I don't know. How many were killed?" He started to rise. "Was there a body inside the house?"

"Just Shorty's." He laughed. "Shot in the back, so you see what way he was headed."

Ryan was unable to get more information from him. He decided that Battles had left the camp. He'd left during the fight and taken the girl with him.

The girl had mentioned Nulato Bob, the boat builder. He walked to the sagging riverhouse where a single skin oomiyak was tied. He could remember looking down from the heights and seeing a canoe there the evening before.

A broad, very bow legged Siwash halfbreed was inside the cavelike living quarters, peering at him.

"Where's Battles?"

The man didn't answer.

Ryan went inside, followed him as he backed across the room. He shouted, "Where's Battles?"

"No savvy."

"You savvy all right. Where's Battles and the girl?"

The breed shook his head violently and kept repeating, "No savvy." He backed up until a table stopped him. He tried to get around it. Ryan's right hand shot out, grabbing him by his grease-blackened buckskin shirt.

Ryan jerked him back and forth until his hat flew off and his long hair strung across his face. iHs mouth was open and spittle ran from the corners.

"Talk! You savvy all right. Where are they? Talk! Talk!"

"Sure. Me savvy now. Me savvy good."

"They took the canoe?"

"Yes."

"Where'd they go?"

"Downriver. I don't know. They don't tell me. They—"

"Who was with them? Battles, the girl, and who else?"

"Just halfbreed. Just Steve. Just three."

Ryan bent his spine over the table until he gasped, and then he bent it a little more. "You know what I'll do if you're lying? I'll come back here and break you in half."

"No, I talk true!" he gasped. "I talk true as hell!"

VI

HE HAD no choice but to take the oomiyak.

The oomiyak was made of skin stretched over a birch frame. Made to carry as many as five men, it was buoyant, but cumbersome.

The current took him swiftly, he turned a bend, and left the town behind. The placer diggings played out. He was in a wilderness of scabby hills and jackpine.

A large stream flowed in from the west. It doubled the river's volume, but its width narrowed. It ran deep and swift between walls of rusty black basalt.

This was the Ophir River. Ever since coming to the country he'd heard white water men talk about the Ophir, naming its course from Mucker Hill to Yukon Flats the swiftest fifty miles in the North. Certain names came back to him—the Tom Hall Chutes, Big Six Rapids, and Hell's Skidway. Lots of canoe men bragged that they'd shot the Hell's Skidway, but it was something a man did only once, to prove himself, like a Cree lad winning his eagle feather.

The sun rose hot on his back. An hour passed, and the current had carried him far downstream.

The valley narrowed. Ahead of him the stream was pinched down to a third of its former width. He kept the oomiyak in midstream and took the plunge without incident. Below were choppy rapids with the stream cut into many channels.

He rode between sheer-sided islands of stone; boat-shaped islands with gnarled little pine trees growing on their tops. The channel was so narrow he could have reached his canoe paddle and touched the stone on either side.

There was a pocket among the hills with gulches fanning out in all directions. The bottoms were filled with cottonwoods. A cow moose waded and stopped to look at him.

He took a wide sweep of the river, noticed a canoe-float toward the right bank, a tiny cabin on the rock bank beyond.

He kept going with the current pulling his oomiyak faster and faster. He spotted a portage trail along the basaltic bluffs to his right. Too late he realized that he'd

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stumbled into the headwaters of Hell's Skidway.

The river was quiet. Its current made glassy swells, dipped and swelled again. It slid at a half-mile-a-minute rate along the smooth-worn bottom. Ahead, through rising mist, he could hear the deep boom of water torn to froth by crags and waterfall.

He felt a slight lurch as the boat speeded. It was still smooth. Looking at the water, he had the impression of standing still. It was only on glancing at the canyon walls that he realized how swiftly the current was carrying him.

Spray met him with a sudden wave. The boat lurched and creaked. For blind seconds it seemed that the craft had crumpled under the impact of crosscurrents. Then, through spray, he saw the prow still at the correct angle, sinking, dipping water, rising, dipping again.

He battled to keep it lined with the current. A crag split the channel ahead. To his left lay the broader half of the river, apparently without obstruction. To his right it was funnelled down through a narrow chute.

He fought to swing away from the chute. For a few seconds he seemed to be winning, but a swerve of the current seized the craft, and all his paddling had been futile.

He didn't struggle further. He sat back knowing the river would do what it wanted with him. Its power was too vast.

For a quarter-minute—a quarter-mile—vertical rock walls closed the channel in. He burst in the clear. He saw then that the channel he'd fought to attain was cut to churning froth by a thousand crags that rose from the bottom. They would have swamped the oomiyak, cut it to ribbons, but luck, in spite of all his efforts, had guided him the way of safety.

There was still a long stretch of rapids ahead, but he was able to maneuver them, and he saw on shore the lower terminus of the portage trail.

He looked for Battles and the girl. No sign of them. He wondered if they, too, had shot the rapids. If not, if they'd taken the portage, he'd been able to obliterate the hour's head start they had from Mucker.

He crossed choppy water, cleared a gravelly point, shot more rapids. They seemed like nothing after Hell's Skidway.

A bullet tore splinters from the front gunwale and whipped past his shoulder. The crack and echo of a high power rifle smacked down close atop it.

He instinctively went to the bottom of the oomiyak. The craft had shipped six inches of water, and his rifle was somewhere under the surface. He groped, found it, poured water from the barrel.

They were ahead of him less that three hundred yards. Two men, a canoe. It made him go gutless and sick. For a second he feared she had died in the fire; that the men back in Mucker had lied to him. Then he saw her, seated in the bottom, lying back, evidently with elbows bound to the canoe's center seat.

A second bullet shot up a spurt of water a couple yards to his right.

BATTLES was in the prow, firing at him. The tall breed was in the stern, maneuvering the canoe.

He dropped the gun. He cursed them for hiding behind a woman.

He had no chance in an open chase. They'd kill him without his daring to fire a shot back. His only chance was to get out of range, and follow them until luck gave him an opening.

He swung the oomiyak toward shore. The third bullet skipped water and tore a hole through both sides at the waterline. Battles was firing as fast as he could lever the rifle. The river geysered through from a dozen places. Ryan could feel the craft lose buoyancy. Crouched in the bottom, water rolled midway of his thighs. The craft listed slowly. He tried desperately to compensate with his own weight, but it kept going, water gurgling over the side, and capsized.

He was over his head in the stream. He was being carried with the gray white river all around him. He lost all sense of direction, of up and down. Then, without knowing how it happened, he was on his feet, balanced against the current, wading waist-deep over the rock-slippery bottom toward shore.

He rested and coughed water from his lungs. There was no longer any sign of the canoe.

He felt for his gun. The holster was

empty. He was unarmed except for the hunting knife at his belt.

He walked for hours, following the shore where he could, leaving it when the river passed through canyon walls, returning, watching for the canoe. The sun grew hot and dried his clothes, it sank and a cold wind sprang up. The hills played out, the river meandered off into the Yukon flats.

This was barren country, muskeg country, cottonwood and brush country. He climbed a tree, saw the river tracings for miles until it bent westward to join the mighty Yukon, but no canoe.

In half a mile he was startled by a voice from willows near the water's edge. It was Steve, the halfbreed.

"Ryan, you come. Good Injun hurt bad."

He stopped, drew his hunting knife. The thought of ambush was in his mind but he dismissed it. The breed was no more than fifty steps away, short enough range for any ambush.

"What are you doing here?"

"Hurt—bad. Bullet, you savvy?"

"Where's Battles and the girl?"

Steve cursed until his voice played out, naming Battles every vile word in English and the coastal jargons. He was still cursing when Ryan worked through the tangle of brush and found him.

He was lying on his back, his shirt was open to the waist, a bloody bandage was twisted around his chest.

"Who got you? Battles?"

"Stray bullet. Cabin. I don't know. He shoot Shorty by mistake, maybe me, too. I think—just scratch. You savvy?" He had to lie still to get the strength to go on. "So, I come with them. But all the time in canoe it bleed. I ask for rest, *no you carry the long portage*. I ask for sleep in bottom of canoe, *no you swing the paddle*. Pretty soon I think I die. He kick me overboard. He think I drown." Steve showed his long, yellowish teeth in a grin. "But I die hard, you savvy?"

"How long you been here?"

"I don't know. Maybe he get to beeg river already, maybe not."

"You got a gun?"

"Just knife. You want to kill heem, take knife?"

"I already got a knife."

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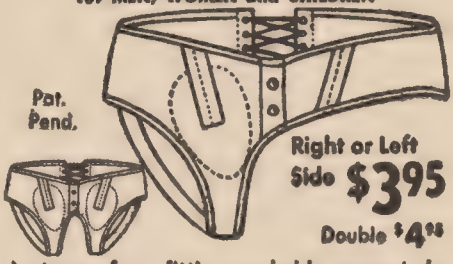

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Ryan took time to look at the wound. The bullet had gone through, breaking some ribs. Perhaps it had nicked a lung.

"Cough any blood?"

"Leetle."

He bandaged it, using dry moss on the wound openings. Then he stood and said, "I'll come back."

Steve struggled to sit up, "Never. He keel you. He—"

"I die hard, too. I'll come back."

He ran now, forgetting the fatigue that had steadily deadened his muscles. He ran for a mile, walked a hundred yards, ran again. A high-water creek lay in front of him. He waded it, moccasins deep in the mucky bottom, water to his armpits. He kept going across tundra and muskeg, through brush and cottonwood.

He cut across a wide bend of the river, and was reapproaching its cutbank shore when a girl's scream shattered the evening quiet.

Len! He heard a muttered, guttural word from Battles, a thud and crash like a sudden, brief struggle.

He'd gone to one knee in the cover of scab brush, now he edged on, found better concealment in brush saplings.

He wasn't certain which direction the sounds had came from. The river was only thirty or forty steps away, and the distance had been greater than that. He moved swiftly, skirting the brush, for a hundred yards. Ahead of him lay a high-water channel as yet not reached by spring flood, filled with a low growth of saplings and brush.

He glimpsed a flash of scarlet—the canoe. There was movement, a muffled, gasping cry of the girl.

A gun exploded as he took his first step down the bank.

It came from point blank range. The bullet hit him. It spun him off his feet. He felt no pain. He seemed to be floating. Shock left a high, ringing sound in his ears.

The bullet had turned him half way around. He fell head first down the slope, slid with his left arm outflung, was stopped by a dense tangle of rose thorns.

The thorns hid him momentarily and saved his life.

Battles fired blind through the brush The slug tore damp earth by Ryan's head.

Acting on instinct, he rolled to his feet, dived headlong through the bushes, and Battles was right below.

Battles tried to lever a third cartridge into his rifle, to bring the muzzle around. Ryan thrust the barrel high. The hunting knife was in his right hand. He swung it in a terrific horizontal arc.

Battles, staggering back, escaped the knife. Its point, grabbing his mackinaw, twisted over and flew from Ryan's hand.

Ryan had recovered somewhat from shock. He knew better than bend over for the knife. He continued his charge, trying to keep the big man off balance.

Battles got a foothold and pivoted. With a swing of his body he pulled the rifle free. He stood at his full height, feet set wide, the gun gripped in both hands, and drove its steel-shod butt down toward Ryan's skull.

It would have crushed his skull like a dry mushroom. He saw Ryan drop and thought that had happened. He laughed with a wild shout and cried, "So you caught me—for *this!*"

With the word *this* he drove the gun butt again, but Ryan had taken the first blow glancing off his neck and shoulder, and as the second came, he grappled with arms around Battles' thick thighs.

The second blow missed. He carried Battles staggering backward. He got his footing. He stood, lifting the big man in his arms. Battles tried to use the gun and failed. He let it fall, and swung his fists. Ryan carried him, running, and fell with him, flinging him head foremost to the sharp rocks at the edge of the river.

Battles picked himself up. The saw edge of a rock had sliced his right ear until it hung by a ribbon down the side of his neck.

The fall had left Battles groggy. He felt for his ear, knew what had happened. It infuriated him. He charged and was met by a left and right. He went down like one hit by a sledge.

He got up. He took another left and right. His head rolled. His loose jaw sagged, his eyes stared without seeing. He went down again and again. He ended on his face in knee-deep water.

Ryan watched the milky river roll over him for a few seconds and started forward to pull him out, but the big man had a

brute's endurance. He got to his feet with a dripping, rectangular chunk of rock in his hands. He tried to lift it, drive it down on Ryan's skull, but his feet slipped from under him. The rock tangled itself inside the front of his shirt. He got up. Its weight carried him off balance. He was waist deep. He fell, got up. The stone was no longer there, but the river current and its slick rock and mud baffled him. He floundered deep, lashing the water to a froth as the undertow grabbed him.

He was gone, and the river was very quiet. A big stream, a deep stream, flowing between muskeg banks to Yukon, to Norton Sound, to the Bering Sea.

Ryan noticed that the left arm of his mackinaw was heavy from blood. He climbed the bank, and saw Len, fighting herself free from some babiche thongs that held her wrists to a cottonwood sapling. A strip of cloth had been wound tightly around her mouth as a gag.

He found his knife on the ground, cut her free.

"You're wounded," were the first words she said. "Take off your mackinaw."

He didn't seem to hear. He took her by the arms, just below her shoulders, helped her to stand.

"Len! I never thought I'd see you again."

"Take off your mackinaw." She got free of him, grabbed the front of his mackinaw, pulled it open. "Now lie down before you bleed to death."

He watched her cut the sleeve of his shirt off revealing the bullet wound, and work swiftly staunching the flow of blood.

"It missed the vein by half an inch. You were lucky."

"That's the luck of the Ryans. Never good judgement, but just plain luck that always carried the Ryans through."

"You weren't lucky about one thing."

"What's that, girl?"

She tilted her head at the river. "He had the girdle."

He'd almost forgotten about the girdle. "I'm shedding no tears, girl. I was rich once, and I want no part of it again. It was by the merest good fortune that I lived through it. Champagne! how my stomach grows ill at first thought of the stuff."

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She had finished with the bandage. He noticed that quite by accident his hand rested on hers. He took her hand, and gripped it quite hard. She made no effort to free herself. Seated on the ground, she smiled and waited, her dark eyes watching him, her lips slightly parted.

RELIGION AND THE ESKIMO

When missionaries first came to the Arctic the Eskimos found it very difficult to understand their religion. There were many things that pleased the natives: It removed a number of taboos, and made it possible for them to eat anything they liked at any time. But the new religion permitted them to have only one wife—and that was very inconvenient at times. For the missionaries frowned upon the old custom of borrowing a friend's wife—to take on a journey, for example; or to make up one's winter wardrobe. This worked a hardship on the men for some Eskimo women are better at making seal-skin boots and caribou-skin attigis than others. In the old days, you could, if you were willing to relinquish your pretty young wife for a couple of weeks, get a real bargain in a seamstress.

Nowadays, say the Eskimo men, it is very difficult when you want to make a trip of perhaps a hundred miles by dogteam, and your wife is expecting a baby. She can't make the trip, of course; yet he needs a woman to mend his skin clothing, do the cooking, dry his boots and socks at night, and be a companion to him on the journey. Before the missionaries came, he could have borrowed a friend's wife who was in good condition for traveling; she might even visit a sister or a brother at the village he was headed for.

There was another phase of the white man's religion that the Eskimos found difficult to understand: The "do unto others" precept. The natives tried to practice this philosophy. When one of them had two wives, and it was quite obvious that the missionary didn't have any, he would say: "Here; you have no wife. I have two. Take one!" The missionary would be very grateful, and would explain that Jesus would not approve.

"Why?" the Eskimo would ask. "Surely if I had two pairs of boots, and you didn't have any, it would be all right for me to give you a pair. Why isn't it all right for me to give you one of my wives?"

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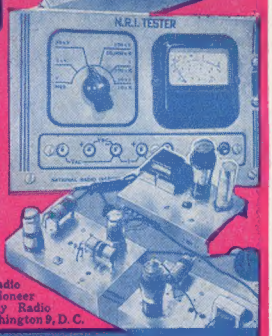

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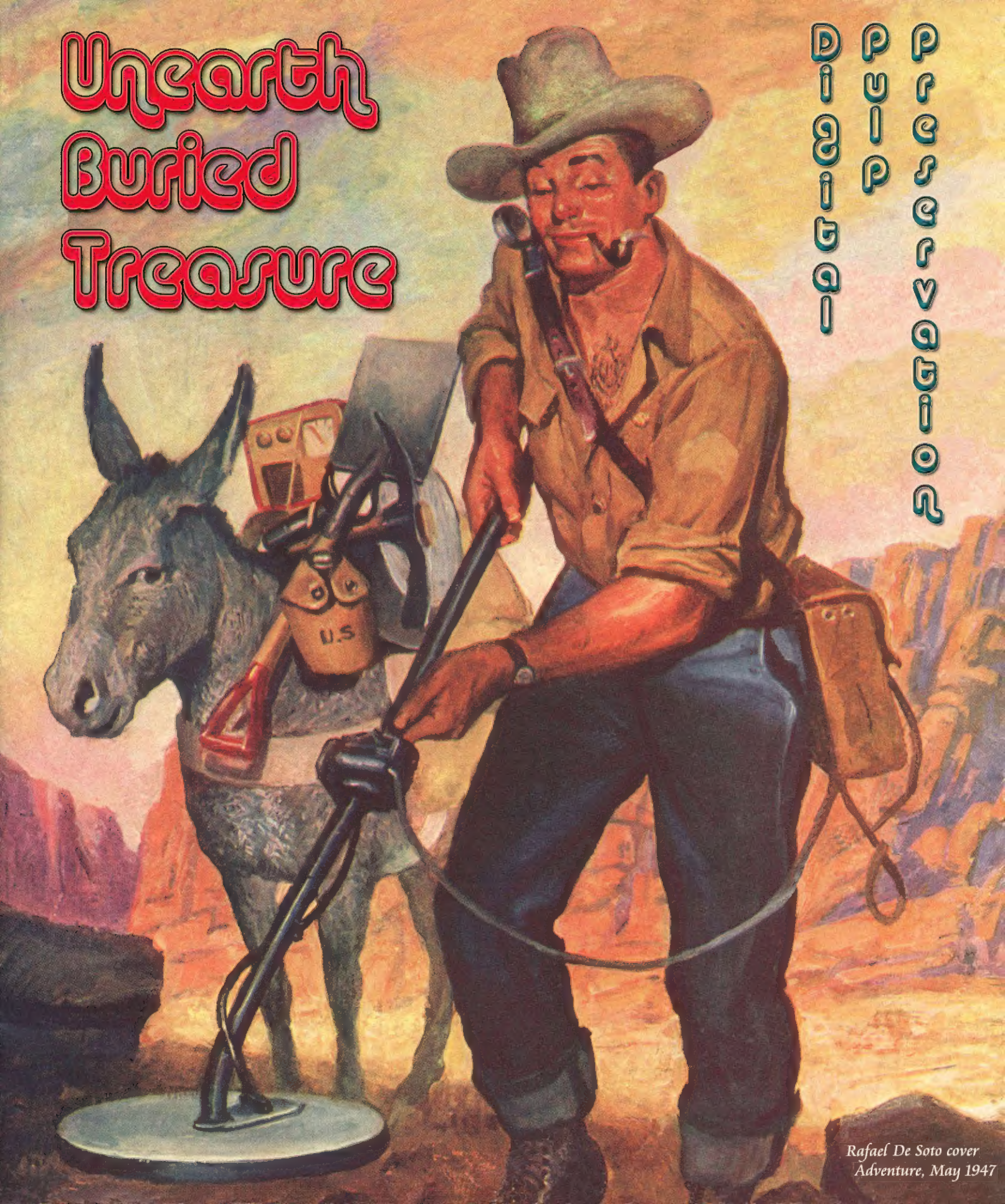

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